

The top half of the cover features an abstract, artistic photograph. It shows numerous small, glistening water droplets on a surface, likely glass. In the background, there are faint, out-of-focus silhouettes of people, possibly in a social setting, which adds a sense of memory and atmosphere to the design. The color palette is dominated by cool blues and greys, with some lighter, hazy areas where the silhouettes are visible.

methuen | drama student editions

SHELAGH STEPHENSON
THE MEMORY OF WATER

EDITED BY STEVE LEWIS

B L O O M S B U R Y

SHELAGH STEPHENSON

The Memory of Water

with commentary and notes by
STEVE LEWIS

B L O O M S B U R Y
LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

Bloomsbury Methuen Drama

An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

50 Bedford Square

London

WC1B 3DP

UK

1385 Broadway

New York

NY 10018

USA

www.bloomsbury.com

**Bloomsbury is a registered trade mark of
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc**

The Memory of Water was first published in 1997 by Methuen Drama

This edition first published in the United Kingdom in 2008 by

Bloomsbury Methuen Drama

Reprinted 2013

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: PB: 978-0-4137-7614-3

EPDF: 978-1-4081-4934-8

EPUB: 978-1-4725-4933-1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

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Steve Lewis would like to thank Shelagh Stephenson for her helpful comments and Richard Johnson for access to his comprehensive archive of theatre programmes.

Shelagh Stephenson

- 1955 November: born in Tynemouth, Northumberland. Middle child of five sisters. Brought up Catholic.
- 1967 Attends Whitley Bay Grammar School, studying A levels in English, History and French.
- 1974 Studies Drama at Manchester University.
- 1977 Works as an actor in theatre and television,
–87 including a season with the Royal Shakespeare Company (1981).
- 1989 *Lethal Cocktails*, a play for radio, broadcast.
- 1990 *Eating in Our Dreams*, a play for radio, with Anna Massey and Phoebe Nichols, directed by Jeremy Mortimer.
- 1993 *Darling Peidi*, a radio drama, directed by Jeremy Mortimer, broadcast on BBC Radio 4. About Edith Thompson and her lover Frederick Bywaters who were hanged for the murder of her husband in 1923.
- 1994 *The Anatomical Venus*, a play for radio, directed by Jeremy Mortimer.
- 1995 *Bonjour Tristesse*, a dramatisation of Françoise Sagan's 1950s classic story, broadcast on radio, directed by Eoin O'Callaghan. The cast included Emily Mortimer, Lindsay Duncan and Helen Baxendale.
- 1996 *Five Kinds of Silence*, the original radio version, broadcast, winning the Writers' Guild Award for Best Original Play and the Mental Health Media Award for Best Radio Play. Cast included Tom Courtenay, Lesley Sharp, Julia Ford and Sue Johnston, directed by Jeremy Mortimer. *The Memory of Water* produced in July at the Hampstead Theatre, London, directed by Terry

- Johnson with Haydn Gwynne, Jane Booker and Matilda Ziegler playing Mary, Teresa and Catherine. Writes two episodes of the BBC series, *Casualty*, entitled *A Taste of Freedom* and *Always on My Mind*.
- 1997 *An Experiment with an Air Pump* is the joint recipient of the Peggy Ramsay Award for new plays. *Five Kinds of Silence* awarded the Society of Authors Sony Awards for Best Radio Play.
- 1998 February: *An Experiment with an Air Pump* opens at the Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester, directed by Matthew Lloyd. It transfers to the Hampstead Theatre in October with Barbara Flynn in the Susannah/Ellen role. *The Memory of Water* opens in a new autumn touring production, directed by Terry Johnson. Mary, Teresa and Catherine played by Samantha Bond, Alison Steadman and Julia Sawalha. *The Memory of Water* has its American premiere at New York's Manhattan Club.
- 1999 The touring production of *The Memory of Water* transfers to the Vaudeville Theatre in the West End. *An Experiment with an Air Pump* has its American premiere at New York's Manhattan Club.
- 2000 May: stage version of *Five Kinds of Silence* produced at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, directed by Ian Brown. *The Memory of Water* wins the Olivier Award for Best Comedy. November: *Ancient Lights* produced at the Hampstead Theatre, London, directed by Ian Brown.
- 2002 A radio version of *An Experiment with an Air Pump* broadcast on BBC Radio 3, directed by Eoin O'Callaghan. The film version of *The Memory of Water* is released, retitled *Before You Go*. The screenplay is written by Shelagh Stephenson; the film stars Julie Walters (Teresa), Victoria Hamilton (Catherine) and Joanne Whalley (Mary), directed by Lewis Gilbert and produced

- by Eoin O'Callaghan. October: *Mappa Mundi* is produced at the National Theatre's Cottesloe Theatre, directed by Bill Alexander. Writes episode one of a three-part television series *Helen West*, starring Amanda Burton.
- 2003 Wins the prestigious Sloan Commission Award in New York. *The Affairs of Men*, a two-part series for Four Boys Films, Los Angeles.
- 2004 *Life's a Dream* broadcast as a BBC Radio 4 Afternoon Play in May and *Through a Glass Darkly* on BBC Radio 3 in June, both directed by Eoin O'Callaghan.
- 2005 March: *Enlightenment* produced at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, directed by Ben Barnes. Marries Eoin O'Callaghan. *Not a Love Story*, film commissioned by Channel 4.
- 2006 *The Anatomical Venus*, film commissioned by Pacificus Productions.
- 2008 *The Long Road*, written for Synergy Theatre as part of the Forgiveness Project, produced at the Soho Theatre, London.

Plot

Act One

Mary is lying in the bed of her mother, Vi, who has recently died. The scene is dreamlike because the Vi who appears is a ghost of Mary's mother when she was in her forties. A green tin box with chrysanthemums on it, containing some papers, is on Mary's mind and she asks her mother if she knows where it is, but Vi says she has no idea.

There is a blackout and when the lights come up, Mary gets up from the bed and starts rifling through some of the drawers. The phone rings and she speaks to someone she obviously knows (Mike who arrives later in the scene). The sound of the phone ringing has attracted the attention of Teresa who is Mary's elder sister. Teresa presumes that it was Mary's boyfriend on the phone and makes it clear that she does not approve of her younger sister going out with a married man. All Mary wants to do is get some sleep but Teresa wants to know where their younger sister Catherine is. This leads on to some confused reminiscences about their childhood.

Mary tries to settle back down in bed and pulls out a breast pump from under the covers which turns out to have been their mother's. Mary brings up the subject of their father's funeral and reminds Teresa that her mobile phone went off during the service. They differ in their memory of whether Teresa answered her phone or not. Mary is uncomfortable about sleeping in their mother's bed especially as she's found a toenail. Teresa picks up a medical book which Mary has brought with her and they argue about the fact that Mary cannot forget her work as a doctor and it was Teresa who had to look after their sick mother. They try to talk about funeral arrangements and their younger sister Catherine bursts in carrying lots of shopping. Catherine describes her journey in the taxi, complains about

a stomach pain and grabs the whisky. Teresa does her concerned-older-sister act, saying that they have been worried about her, but Catherine insists that she has merely been out shopping to cheer herself up. Mary just wants to go back to sleep.

Catherine wants to know if her Spanish boyfriend, Xavier, has phoned which leads to another argument. Catherine wants some painkillers which raises the subject of Teresa's belief in alternative medicines and therapies. As a qualified medical practitioner Mary has little time for unconventional medical treatments. Catherine goes off 'to have a hot bath and a joint' but soon returns to try out some of her new clothes when she finds there is no hot water. Teresa recalls how she and Frank, her husband, received the news about their mother's death at the hospital: Teresa's reaction was laughter. Teresa is tense and Catherine offers her a puff of the joint she is smoking.

During the next section the sisters talk about their mother who was suffering from Alzheimer's disease and Catherine is convinced that their mother hated her. She recalls a time when she was left on a beach as a child but Teresa insists that it happened to Mary. Teresa finds her lost organiser and wants to get on and organise the flowers for the funeral. The phone rings and Mary gets to it before Catherine, who hopes it is her boyfriend, but then the phone goes dead. Catherine recounts a story about a funeral she went to in Spain, while she makes a sandwich. Mary mentions to Teresa that she has been having dreams about their mother and they realise that she never talked to either of them about sex.

There is a banging at the window and it is Mike who has been trying to get in. He climbs in through the window and is introduced by Mary to Teresa and Catherine for the first time. Catherine recognises Mike from the television because he is a celebrity doctor. They talk and she bursts into tears, which Teresa and Mary recognise as her attempt to get attention. The phone rings again and Catherine answers it only to discover that it is Frank, Teresa's husband.

Mary and Mike are left alone. They soon get on to the

subject of Mike's wife. Mary is angry because Mike's reason for not wanting to leave his wife is that she is very ill but Mary has seen a photograph of them together at a party. Mike gets into the bed to keep warm but Mary sits primly on the edge of it. The subject of her patient with memory loss comes up and Mike makes reference to some experiments that suggest that water has memory. Mary tells Mike that she thinks she is pregnant but he says that he cannot be the father because he has had a vasectomy.

Teresa returns with black bin bags, followed by Catherine who is smoking another joint. They both jump to the conclusion that Mike and Mary have been having sex. Teresa starts to take clothes out of the wardrobe and Catherine rummages through them looking for things to try on. Mike is recruited to hold open the bags, one for rubbish and one for charity clothes. Teresa becomes light-headed from the drags she takes from Catherine's joint and before long she and Catherine are dressing up in their dead mother's clothes. Mary is exasperated and starts stuffing clothes into the bin bags, while discussing Mike's vasectomy which was carried out by a surgeon who is about to be struck off the medical register. By this time Mary has put on the dress that she dreamed her mother was wearing at the beginning of the play and Frank enters to witness all three sisters screeching with laughter wearing 1950s/60s dresses. Frank regales them with his tale of the terrible journey he has had from Düsseldorf, meets Mike and is persuaded to take a photograph of the three sisters. As they pose for the photograph, the ghost of Vi joins them and the lights fade on a still image of a mother and her three daughters.

Act Two

Scene One

Mary is alone with Vi and asks her again if she knows the whereabouts of the chrysanthemum tin. Vi cannot understand how her three daughters have turned out the way they have and why they remember things differently

from how she does. They seem to have forgotten everything she did for them when they were growing up and instead focus on what was wrong with their childhood. Vi says she is proud of Mary's achievements but that Mary has no humility and is ashamed of her own mother. Vi says that she and Mary have more in common than Mary would like to believe.

Scene Two

Catherine is praying for the phone to ring. When Mary enters, Catherine gives in and dials Xavier's number. She gets through to someone in Spain but is cut off. Teresa and Frank enter and Catherine pretends that she has been speaking to Xavier. Teresa gives Mary a florist's catalogue and organises Frank to take the black plastic bin bags out to the car. Catherine meanwhile is providing reasons why Xavier might not make it to the funeral. Mike has been having a hot bath and comes in with a towel around him, holding his clothes. Mary makes her choice of funeral flowers but Catherine refuses to choose a wreath and shuts herself in the wardrobe. Frank suggests that she should stay off the drugs and she shoots out of the wardrobe when the phone rings: it is Xavier calling her. It is apparent from Catherine's reaction that Xavier is ending their relationship but, when she gets off the phone, she simply announces that he will not be attending the funeral.

Catherine tries to pretend that she is not upset but eventually she shows her emotions by throwing a tin across the room, narrowly missing Frank, and bursting into tears. Before rushing from the room, Catherine lets the assembled company know that she has been to a therapist and that Xavier is one of a long line of men who have treated her badly because, she says, she is too giving. Mike expresses some sympathy for Catherine only to be shot down by Teresa who, fuelled by a glass of whisky, reminds him that he has been 'two-timing his wife'. Frank tries to apologise for Teresa's behaviour but she is in full flight, suggesting to Mary that they are just like their mother who always took

their father's side even though he spent most of his life ignoring her. Teresa brings up the fact that their mother managed to hide Mary's teenage pregnancy from their father and that the baby was adopted. Taking more drink, Teresa shows all the resentment she feels about the way Mary received preferential treatment as a child. Upset by Teresa's verbal attack on her, Mary walks out, followed by Mike, leaving Frank and Teresa alone together.

Frank chastises Teresa for her drunken behaviour and she starts to cry. The exchange between husband and wife provides an insight into their marriage. Frank is fed up with trying to sell their health-food products and Teresa feels that he is not the 'witty and entertaining' man she thought she married and suspects him of having an affair. Teresa reacts to Frank's idea of giving up his role in their health-food business to run a pub by rushing out of the room to be sick, passing Catherine on the way. Catherine asks Frank's advice about Xavier and ends up settling her head in his lap. Catherine accuses Frank of being like all men and misreading the signals after she has hugged and kissed him. Mary and Mike return and are left alone by Catherine and Frank.

Mary has found the tin she has been looking for and explains to Mike that she wants to get in touch with the boy she had when she was fourteen: she finds his birth certificate in the tin. Mary is pleased that she is pregnant but Mike makes it clear to her that he does not want any more children. Frank and Catherine return with the news that Teresa has arranged for their mother's coffin to be brought to the house for the night before the funeral.

Scene Three

It is the next morning and the closed coffin is in the room. Teresa gets off the phone and explains to Catherine that the funeral director is short-staffed. They discuss the size of their mother's coffin and Catherine's lack of success with boyfriends. Teresa says she has found the right man in Frank but Catherine says that he reminds her of their father.

Mary arrives dressed for the funeral having spent the night in a hotel. Catherine goes off to get dressed. Teresa apologises to Mary for her drunken behaviour and Mary retrieves the tin from under the bed. Teresa grabs the tin from Mary and they fight over it. Mary wants to know the reason for Teresa's odd behaviour. Teresa is forced to reveal that Patrick, the boy Mary bore when she was fourteen, was killed in an accident and that she and their mother have known about it for some time. Teresa leaves to help Frank find his trousers.

The lights change and Vi enters to look at herself in the coffin. Vi explains that she thought it best not to tell Mary about Patrick's death because Mary was in the middle of her finals. She blames Mary for being distant. Mary asks Vi what it was like during the last months of her life with most of her memories gone. Vi leaves, saying that she forgives Mary and Mary breaks down in tears. Teresa and Frank come in and Teresa's idea of helping Mary in her grief is to provide Rescue Remedy and aconite. Mary announces that her pregnancy was not real and Catherine enters wearing an inappropriately short skirt. Frank takes a phone call from the undertakers who are on their way but require some extra help. They have a drink and make awkward remarks about the coffin until the hearse arrives. Mike and Frank clumsily carry the coffin out of the room and the sisters share a memory of their mother as they put on their coats. Frank and Teresa leave for the funeral with Catherine; Mary and Mike remain behind for a moment. Mary knows that, like the idea of water having a memory, a memory of her mother will always be with her. She gives Mike one last chance to make a decision about leaving his wife to be with her but he fails to commit himself. They leave for the funeral.

Commentary

Background

Writing in the *Spectator*, Sheridan Morley observed, 'If 1999 carries on the way it has started, theatrically this new year is going to be a rough one for the male of the species; five of them turn up in the first two plays of the season, Liz Lochhead's *Perfect Days* and Shelagh Stephenson's *The Memory of Water*, and all are a complete and utter waste of space.' These two plays, notably by female playwrights, were produced in London's West End after considerable success in Edinburgh and Hampstead respectively and mark the end of a decade that will probably be remembered best for the notoriety of Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995) and the unprecedented international commercial success of Yasmina Reza's *Art* (1996). At the time of Shelagh Stephenson's professional stage playwriting debut established playwrights like David Edgar (*Pentecost*, 1995), David Hare (*Skylight*, 1995) and Pam Gems (*Stanley*, 1996) were having their latest works premiered. New writers on the scene included Patrick Marber (*Dealer's Choice*, 1995) and Mark Ravenhill (*Shopping and Fucking*, 1996).

The Memory of Water had a comparatively quiet reception in the summer of 1996 compared with the outraged reaction by most of the press to *Blasted* the previous year which was due mostly to that play's depiction of the brutality of a male journalist towards a young woman and its scenes of anal rape and cannibalism. Established playwrights including Edward Bond and Harold Pinter publicly defended Kane's play and admired the talent of the then twenty-four-year-old playwright. During the time of the revival of *The Memory of Water*, Sarah Kane committed suicide (in February 1999) having suffered from severe depression for most of her life. *Art*, on the other hand, is considered to be a much more lightweight work and owes much of its success to the

producers' idea of re-casting the three male roles with different star names from the world of television and film every six weeks. Sheridan Morley dismisses *Art* as 'coffee-table theatre, the snob hit at its most snobbish, nicely short so that tired businessmen and their clients can make it into a restaurant by 9.30 pm' (Morley and Leon, *A Century of Theatre*, Oberon Books, 2000). However, the principle of using three star names in the leading roles was applied to the revival production of *The Memory of Water* and helped to bring Shelagh Stephenson's work to the attention of a much wider audience.

What is significant about the position of Reza and Kane at the end of the 1990s is the fact that they are equal to their male counterparts. This was far from the situation, though, in the late 1970s, when Shelagh Stephenson, as a drama student at Manchester University, encountered few plays by women. With some notable exceptions, Aphra Benn (1640–89) and Fanny Burney (1752–1840) among them, there are not many women dramatists in the history of British theatre prior to the twentieth century. It was during her time as an actress in the early 1980s that Shelagh Stephenson discovered the work of Caryl Churchill, who led the way as a female playwright with successes such as *Cloud Nine* (1979) and *Top Girls* (1982). Like Churchill in the early part of her career, Stephenson started writing plays for BBC radio and it was through this medium that she developed and honed her skills as a playwright. After eight years of practicing her craft as a writer, her first stage play, *The Memory of Water*, emerged and was well received when it was produced at Hampstead Theatre in 1996.

I looked upon it [her time spent writing for radio] as a carpentry apprenticeship. I knew that eventually I was going to write plays for the stage. I was also convinced – much more than my bank manager – that one day it would all work out. But I was prepared to be patient. (Interview with Lyn Gardner in the *Guardian*, 1999)

Working in the theatre as an actress for ten years, whatever

she might have felt about her acting ('I was a very bad actress. And I always wanted to be a writer really. Acting was just a way of putting off the fatal moment', interview for the Watford Palace production, 2005), this must have stood her in good stead in making the transition from radio to stage, where the way of working is a much more collaborative process between writer, actors and director. As an actress she came to playwriting with the first-hand experience of the way in which a script needs to be shaped in rehearsal and how much of it can be open to interpretation. In her introduction to the first collected volume of her plays (Methuen, 2003), Stephenson has this to say about the writing process:

When you're writing a play, you have a tenuous notion of what it might be about, the world you feel you are exploring. When you've finished it, you read through and feel uncertain as to whether you've achieved a tenth of what you set out to do. The issue is clouded by the fact that at this stage, you can't remember in any truthful way what galvanised you in the first place. All you can do is ask yourself: does it have three-dimensionality, rhythm, dramatic drive and structure? Does it deal with truth? With luck you may be able to say 'yes' to most of these questions. By the time you get into rehearsals, you've handed the remaining intractable problems over to the actors and director. Collaboratively, you try to bring the play to its full potential. Sometimes it works better than others: it can be a dispiriting business. But it can also be a joyous one.

With *The Memory of Water* Stephenson was particularly fortunate to work with Terry Johnson who is not only an experienced theatre director but also a highly accomplished and successful playwright in his own right, whose plays include *Insignificance* (1982), *Dead Funny* (1994) and *Camping, Cleo, Emmanuelle and Dick* (1998) which, like *The Memory of Water*, won the Olivier Award for Best Comedy two years earlier. The play was nurtured in the subsidised theatre sector at Hampstead Theatre, which has a policy of developing and producing new writing, and it achieved both commercial and further artistic success in the West End and on tour, casting 'big names' in the roles of the three sisters.

Alison Steadman, who played Teresa, was well known through her work with the writer/director Mike Leigh, having created the role of Abigail in *Abigail's Party*, and also through starring with Colin Firth as Mrs Bennett in the BBC's acclaimed 1995 version of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Julia Sawalha was cast as the youngest sister, Catherine, having played Lydia Bennett opposite Alison Steadman in the same production of *Pride and Prejudice*, and Saffron in Jennifer Saunders's television comedy series, *Absolutely Fabulous*. The part of Mary was played by Samantha Bond who reached international fame through her appearance as Miss Moneypenny in the four James Bond films, starring Pierce Brosnan, made between 1995 and 2002. The calibre of this cast and the publicity the play received as a result contributed to the play's success and helped to boost both audience and press attention.

However, Stephenson is somewhat self-deprecating about her achievement with *The Memory of Water* when she says, 'It was a good first play, no more. I'm only proud of bits of it. It was a play I had to get out of the way. Afterwards I thought, now I can write what I want' (Lyn Gardner interview, 1999). Between *The Memory of Water*'s first Hampstead production in 1996 and the 1999 revival, Stephenson was hard at work on her next three plays, *An Experiment with an Air Pump* (premiered at Manchester's Royal Exchange Theatre in February 1998), a stage adaptation of her radio play *Five Kinds of Silence* (Lyric Hammersmith, London, May 2000) and a new play for the Hampstead Theatre, *Ancient Lights* (November 2000).

From July to October 2000, Shelagh Stephenson kept a diary account of her writing activities which provides an interesting insight into the way she approaches her work. At the time the diary was written, she had just completed the script for *Ancient Lights* and was starting work on her next play, *Mappa Mundi*. The diary as a whole captures the way in which she becomes obsessed with ideas and how some work and others just take her down blind alleys. It also conveys the difficult process of writing a play and how walking the dog and other displacement activities are

preferable to the task of sitting down and working. At one point she asks herself: 'How *does* one write a play? How did I write the other ones? I can't remember. Shall I start at the beginning and plough on until the end? I think that's how I wrote *An Experiment with an Air Pump*. I also recall that I was stuck on page six for six months.' The interesting thing about *The Memory of Water* is that, apart from the reference in the title, there is very little in the play that is based on detailed research, unlike Stephenson's later plays. While it is not necessarily autobiographical, the personal experience of losing her own mother when she started work on *The Memory of Water* and being one of five sisters inevitably had some influence on her writing. In an interview for the programme of the 2005 Watford Palace production, Stephenson says, 'The characters in the play aren't consciously based on my own experiences. On the other hand, they must come into it somewhere.'

Genre

The fact that *The Memory of Water* won the Laurence Olivier Award for Best Comedy would suggest that the play could simply be classified as such, but if it is a comedy, it is not one with a happy ending nor is it one that uses subject matter (death) usually associated with laughter. The play is comic in the sense that there are many humorous interchanges between the characters and some extremely funny lines but the overall tone of the play is somewhat melancholic. The opening scene between Vi and Mary is set in the hinterland of dreams and, although it is not immediately apparent that Vi is Mary's recently deceased mother, her description of the house disappearing into the sea sets up an atmosphere of loss:

Vi The sea. Fifty yards closer. It'll take the house eventually. All gone without trace. Nothing left. And all the life that happened here, drowned, sunk. As if it had never been. (p. 1)

However, six lines later, Vi is reading the titles of the heavy medical books that Mary has on the bedside table and the

mood suddenly changes with the line: 'Bloody hell, Mary. What's wrong with Georgette Heyer?' It signals the fact that the characters are likely to say things that are not entirely serious and this is very quickly emphasised when Teresa asks Mary who was on the phone and she replies, 'A nuisance caller. We struck up a rapport.' Shelagh Stephenson's use of bathos is a characteristic of her writing and she accomplishes these sudden gear changes from seriousness to something inherently funny.

The play is set in winter and the house is surrounded by snow which means that there is a coldness that underlines the action. Rather than having the sun shine on her characters, Stephenson has created a frozen environment in which to explore the tensions and behaviour of the family at the time of their mother's death. At the end of the play, the writing moves from comedy to the pathos of Mary considering her future without a child and probably without her lover. After a joke about do-it-yourself coffins, Mike and Frank manoeuvre Vi's coffin awkwardly through the door, causing Catherine to laugh and remark, 'Poor Mum. Even her funeral's a cock-up.' The closing moments of the play, between Mike and Mary, bring the focus of the drama back to a chilling reality. Mary has lived her life in the sun but this encounter with her mother's death means that from now on she will have to view life differently. There is no definite resolution to the play, which leaves the audience with a sense of bleakness. Mary's final line, 'Learn to love the cold', has a pessimistic tone about it. It has echoes of Emily Brontë's lines: 'Cold in the earth – and the deep snow piled above thee, / Far, far removed, cold in the dreary grave!' ('Remembrance'). It is a chilling reminder that death is a certainty.

While there is clearly a darker undertone to the play, the moments that leave a lasting impression on an audience are the farcical dressing-up scene in the first act (pp. 42–6) and Teresa's drunken episode in the second act (pp. 60–72). It is also the total lack of decorum shown by all of the characters after Vi's death that adds a comic element to the play. The focus of the funeral and of bereavement should be on the

dear departed but instead most of the attention in the play is on those left behind. The death of Vi is portrayed in a comic light right from the point when Teresa was told the news (or not quite told the news) that their mother was dead.

And the doctor was about twelve, and embarrassed. Eventually we had to say it for him. He kept fiddling with his pen and giving us a rundown of everything that had happened, until eventually Frank said, 'Are you trying to tell us she's not coming back? Are you trying to tell us she's dead?' And he said, 'More or less, yes.' And I said, 'What d'you mean, more or less? She's either dead or she isn't, you can't be a bit dead, for God's sake.' And then I looked at my feet and I was wearing odd shoes. A black one and a brown one. Not even vaguely similar. So I started to laugh and I couldn't stop. They had to give me a sedative. (pp. 17–18)

The play has elements of black comedy about it and the mention of an undertaker with a plastic hand almost takes it into the realms of Joe Orton's *Loot*.

Given that the play teeters between the comic and the serious the most useful way of describing it might be as a tragicomedy but even this term serves to generalise what is an individualistic way of writing and a genre that could be called simply 'Stephenson-esque'. *The Memory of Water* is not a comedy that is played for laughs. The comedy arises from the believability of the characters and the situation they are in and they must be played and interpreted in a truthful way. The fact that the characters, in both their behaviour and their conversation (and therefore the way in which they are acted), are not knowingly funny creates a greater comic impression for the audience. In many ways, *The Memory of Water* is Stephenson's most naturalistic play and her most conventional in form and structure. The setting is confined to one place (Vi's bedroom in the family house) and the action takes place in a little over twenty-four hours. The non-naturalistic aspect of the play is the presence of Vi and the decision to have her portrayed as she was some thirty years before her death. The scenes between the 'ghostly' Vi from the past and the Mary from the

present provide a fourth dimension to the play and for Mary these memories of her mother are very real. These scenes also provide an element of dramatic irony because the audience is privy to Mary's private and imagined encounter with her mother which the other characters on stage are not. There is an intentional and inevitable ambiguity set up by the opening scene because, to all intents and purposes, the play could be set in the 1960s and Vi could be a living person. The shift in time is subtly apparent through the contemporary clothes that Mary is wearing and the change from 'bluish-green light' to the more naturalistic lighting from the bedside lamp. Ghosts have been used to great comic effect, as Noël Coward demonstrated to perfection in *Blithe Spirit*, but Vi is no Elvira and there is no attempt at ghostly intervention in the main action of the play. It is as though Vi's ectoplasm is wrapped around the action of the play until it fades away when she takes one last look in the mirror at the end before leaving Mary to grieve.

The manipulation of time and the juxtaposition of different worlds is a common device in Stephenson's work. The presence of the murdered Billy as a character in *Five Kinds of Silence*, for example, pervades the entire play and is a chilling and constant reminder of the effect he had on the lives of his wife and two daughters. The action of *An Experiment with an Air Pump* alternates between two worlds that are two hundred years apart, one set in 1799 and the other in 1999. *The Long Road* (2008) explores the parallel circumstances of Mary and Emma whose lives are linked through the murder by Emma of Mary's eighteen-year-old son, Danny, and this play is written in a heightened style requiring the minimum of naturalistic settings and props. In *Mappa Mundi* (2002) and *Enlightenment* (2005), Stephenson uses projections as part of the setting: 'A backdrop of grainy, blown-up family photographs, from various dates in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries' (*Mappa Mundi*); 'The rest of the set is suggested by back projections: books and paintings from floor to ceiling' (*Enlightenment*).

This approach to presentation is far removed from the

single, one-room setting of *The Memory of Water*. And yet there is a hint of symbolism in *The Memory of Water*'s setting with the reference to 'a long diagonal crack running across the wall behind the bed'. The crack is there of course because the house is built on a cliff with sea views and during the lifetime of the characters it has been slowly moving towards the sea.

Taking this idea a step further, the house and the memories of the people who lived in it will literally become memories of water when the crack widens and the building crumbles into the sea. Sue Plummer's original set design for the play showed some of the exterior of the house with a broken wooden fence and visual references to the sandy and windswept location of a house by the sea. There is an atmospheric theatricality to the ending of the play with Stephenson's suggestion that the lighting should 'dim to gold and blue' and that the curtains should be seen billowing in a draught of wind which brings in a flurry of snow. All of this is accompanied by the nostalgic and distant strains of a song sung by Nat King Cole whose music has earlier been associated with Vi.

Catherine We were all sleepy in our pyjamas, and she'd put on Nat King Cole. (p. 91)

The effortless oscillation between tragedy and comedy in *A Memory of Water* is typical of Stephenson's writing. The funny line or situation becomes an antidote for the more serious conversation or events in the play. Stephenson's particular way of mixing tragic and comic elements produces an individualistic approach to dramatic comedy and she has invented her own brand of tragi-comedy in the process.

Themes

Philip Larkin's well-known line, 'They fuck you up, your mum and dad' ('This Be The Verse', *High Windows*, Faber, 1974), exactly describes the main theme explored in *The Memory of Water*, which is the potentially negative effect parents can have on their children. The play focuses on the reflections by Mary, Teresa and Catherine on the way their

mother brought them up and on Vi's recollections of what her daughters were like as children. This inevitable review of the years that have passed between childhood and adulthood in the case of the three daughters, and between motherhood and the state of aged parent in Vi's case, relies on memory, memory which is often faulty and coloured by subsequent experiences. The act of remembering and the nature of forgetfulness are significant themes in the play. The context of the drama and the pretext for the family gathering is of course Vi's recent death and her subsequent funeral. Life must come to an end, a fact which is brought home to all of the characters in the play and which is therefore a constant theme. As Shelagh Stephenson herself writes,

Looking back over the plays it's clear to me that whatever I thought I was writing about at the time, they are in fact all about death, dying, being dead, being afraid of death, being obsessed with it. I'm not sure that I set out to do this, but even on a cursory reading it's hard to avoid the conclusion. As to why this may be, well, what else is there in the end?
(Introduction to *Plays: I*, p. ix)

The nature of memory emerges starkly at the time of a person's death because we want to remember he or she as they were when alive. Life is like the theatre in that there is no permanent record of the 'live' event; one had to be there, so to speak, to really know what it was like. As human beings we partly make use of what other people remember and this process is something which Stephenson examines. The notion that water always retains the memory of things dissolved in it serves both as the play's title and as a metaphor for the way in which Vi and her daughters remember their lives together. The play reminds us that all that remains of an individual after he/she is dead is our memories of them and even these can be false or fabricated. Even more alarming is the fact that human beings forget things and that memories fade over time. Vi suffered from Alzheimer's disease in the last years of her life which cruelly erased her memory, to the extent that she did not even know or recognise her own daughters. The Vi who appears

in the play is Mary's memory of her from around twenty-five years earlier and she describes what it felt like to be losing her memory:

Like I had holes in my brain. Frightening. Huge rips. I'd not recognise people. You just think, where am I? What's going on? And then you don't know what you mean when you say 'I'. It didn't seem to mean anything. (p. 85)

The significance of memory as a theme is made explicit in the character of Mary, who is a neurologist treating a patient who has memory loss, and extended through Teresa whose business it is to sell homeopathic medicines and other alternative health remedies. The connection with homeopathy resonates from the play's title which is a reference to the work of the French allergy researcher Jacques Benveniste (1935–2004). Homeopathy is founded on the principle that the body can heal naturally through the introduction of an infinitesimal amount of a remedy akin to the condition that is causing the illness. Homeopathic medicines are prepared through the exponential dilution of a substance until virtually nothing remains. The substance being diluted goes through a vigorous mixing process known as succession. It is thought that this process changes the structure of the solvent molecules and imprints a 'memory' of the original in the water in which it is being diluted. The results of Benveniste's experiments were published in *Nature* magazine but other scientists were unable to replicate his findings and his claim that water has memory was discredited. As a result of the controversy surrounding the validity of his research Benveniste's funding was withdrawn and his reputation as a scientist was seriously damaged. Mike refers directly to Benveniste's work in the play when he says,

they were doing these experiments with water, because they were researching the efficacy of homeopathy, and what they came up with after months and months of apparently stringent tests was that you can remove every last trace of the curative elements from a water solution and it will still retain its

beneficial effect. And they decided that this meant water was like magnetic tape. That water had memory. (p. 36)

Mike dismisses this idea as ‘complete bollocks’ but it has a powerful resonance with Mary in that she senses some kind of connection with Vi, which is evident through her ‘projected’ memory of her mother in the scenes depicting their conversations together. Mary is also preoccupied with the young patient with memory loss she is caring for because he is about the same age as the child her mother made her give away as a teenager. Just as Vi sees traces of herself in Mary so Mary wonders whether there are traces of herself in her son Patrick (p. 84).

The scene early on in the play when the three sisters compare their versions of childhood events demonstrates how they have appropriated each other’s memories or remembered the version they were told as a child:

Catherine She [Vi] had the cat put down without telling me. [...]

Mary And she didn’t have the cat put down, it just died.

Teresa It got run over by a combine harvester actually. (p. 22)

In contrast to this they share a memory of their mother in the final scene about which they all agree:

Catherine D’you remember, when Dad was out sometimes, she used to get us up in the middle of the night and give us crisps and ice-cream soda?

Mary And she’d have a Dubonnet and lemonade. God, I’d forgotten about that.

Teresa She called it a girls’ night in. (p. 91)

The core theme is the presentation of the relationship between the three sisters and, from the first production, it was dubbed as a *Three Sisters* for the modern age. However, its comparison with Chekhov’s play does not extend far beyond his title and the fact that the three central characters are sisters. Chekhov’s Prozorov sisters are an altogether closer family unit than Stephenson’s sisters who live separate

lives and are forced to come together because of their mother's funeral. Sheridan Morley usefully points out why the comparison might have come about:

The Memory of Water [...] is an intriguing throwback to all those plays of the early 1950s by Wynyard Browne [e.g. *The Holly and the Ivy*] and N. C. Hunter [e.g. *Waters of the Moon*], 'English Chekhov' as they were then termed, in which at some kind of family reunion skeletons would tumble from every closet. Sure enough these three sisters, all of whose lives have in their individual ways gone horribly adrift, turn out to have been bruised beyond belief by a maternal upbringing somewhere between Alan Bennett and Joe Orton, and the genius of [Terry] Johnson's production is the way that once again it ends up in bleak, black humour, not waving but drowning in its various admissions of familial guilt and relative failure. (Sheridan Morley, *Spectator at the Theatre*, Oberon Books, 2002)

Because of the reference to Woody Allen's *Hannah and her Sisters* (p. 69) in the play, comparisons have also been drawn between the film's subject matter and that of *The Memory of Water*. It happens to be the film that Teresa and Frank went to on their first date and which Frank admits to having lied about liking. The dysfunctional nature of the families in Allen's film and in *The Memory of Water* is something that these two works have in common but there the similarity ends. All families have stories to tell and a secret or two hiding beneath the surface and it is the way in which these emerge that engages the audience's interest and imagination.

The sisters in *The Memory of Water* behave extraordinarily in extraordinary circumstances. Their emotions are understandably heightened because each is trying to deal with her feelings about their mother's death. For each of the sisters, like any daughter or son, the loss of their mother is a new experience and none of them is entirely in control of her emotions, which is what makes the drama interesting to watch. It is the unusualness of the situation which Stephenson exploits for dramatic purposes and which allows the characters to behave in the way that they do. The whole play is framed by the dramatic irony created by the

presence of Vi as a spectre of the woman and mother she once was. Whenever any of the daughters mentions their mother, the audience has the reference point of the character of Vi who has been seen and heard at the beginning of each half of the play. One of the essential questions that the play examines is how it is possible for three daughters born of the same woman to turn out so differently from each other as well as being so different from their own mother. Vi sums this up when she says,

I look at you and I think, you've come out wrong, all of you. There's something not quite right about how you've turned out. Not what I expected. [...] You seem like nice, personable people. I expect you are, but I don't know what you've got to do with me. You're closed off. I can't seem to get the hang of any of you. (p. 51)

In other words, despite all her best efforts as a mother and parent, her three daughters have gone their own separate ways and she is left wondering how they could have become what they are. The question is also looked at the other way around in that each of the daughters is wondering to what extent she is like her mother.

Recent research suggests that parents are stricter with their first child and are more relaxed in the way discipline is applied to their subsequent offspring. These findings aptly fit the way Vi appears to have reared her three daughters. Teresa, the eldest, is the most compliant and the one who has stayed closest to home; Mary has an independent streak but, despite being the most intelligent of the three, managed to get herself pregnant at fourteen; while Catherine, the youngest, is by far the wildest and most non-conformist. The mother/daughter relationship is emphasised in the play almost to the exclusion of any father/daughter relationship; it is made clear that their father barely figured in their lives compared to their mother: 'Our father . . . hardly spoke at all during the forty-eight years he was married to our mother . . . He was like a professional mute' (Teresa, p. 62). For Teresa at least, as for a lot of daughters in her position, the tables turned in the mother/daughter relationship

because she ended up caring for her mother in her old age and becoming the parent in her mother's childlike state brought on by dementia.

The death of Vi and the funeral that follows provide the catalyst for the action and the story of *The Memory of Water*. The death of their mother is the reason why the three grown-up sisters, Teresa, Mary and Catherine return to the family home. The ghost of their mother, literally for Mary, pervades the atmosphere of the play and, just as she provided the means for her three daughters' entry into the world, they are gathered to make the necessary arrangements for her exit from it.

Structure

The narrative structure of *The Memory of Water* is built around six characters. This sextet is divided into two groups of three principal roles and three supporting roles. Teresa, Mary and Catherine are at the centre of the play, with Vi (or at least her recent demise) as the *raison d'être* for the drama. Apart from Vi's 'invisible' appearance in the photographic freeze-frame at the end of Act One, she is only in scenes with her middle daughter Mary. Frank and Mike are the partners of Teresa and Mary respectively and, in both character and structural terms, they are there to support these two roles. Catherine has no one to support her, apart from her sisters, and this fact becomes part of her story in the play.

The play is built around eighteen episodes presented in four scenes with variations in the combinations of the characters and, in outline, runs like this:

Act One

Vi and Mary (pp. 1–2)

Mary and Teresa (pp. 2–9)

Mary, Teresa and Catherine (pp. 10–27)

Mary, Teresa, Catherine and Mike (pp. 27–32)

Mary and Mike (pp. 32–40)

Mary, Teresa, Catherine, Mike and Frank with Vi

appearing in freeze-frame in the closing moment (pp. 40–48)

Act Two, Scene One

Vi and Mary (pp. 49–54)

Act Two, Scene Two

Ensemble with focus on Catherine (pp. 54–9)

Teresa, Frank, Mary and Mike with focus on Teresa (pp. 59–66)

Teresa and Frank (pp. 66–72)

Catherine and Frank (pp. 72–4)

Mary and Mike (pp. 74–6)

Ensemble (pp. 76–8)

Act Two, Scene Three – next morning

Teresa and Catherine with crossover to next episode, (pp. 78–80)

Teresa and Mary (pp. 80–3)

Vi and Mary (pp. 83–6)

Ensemble (pp. 86–91)

Mary and Mike (pp. 91–3)

The action between the end of Act One and the beginning of Act Two is almost continuous. The only significant shift in time is between Act Two, Scene Two, and Act Two, Scene Three, to allow time for Vi's coffin to be brought to the house. Act One is essentially the exposition of the play, Act Two, Scenes One and Two, the development, and Act Two, Scene Three, the denouement. In this respect the play has a relatively conventional structure, although the three 'timeless' and dream-like scenes between Vi and Mary are like a prelude, an entr'acte and an interlude and could be removed without affecting the overall narrative. However, without these scenes, *The Memory of Water* would be a very different kind of play and they are essential to provide a different and more interesting layer of meaning to the drama. They allow Vi to put her own point of view and her own version of events and their surreal nature brings the memory debate alive. Without these scenes, the focus of the play would be entirely on the reaction of the sisters to the

death of their parent and their recounting stories of their relationship with their mother in the past. To some extent it could be argued that the Vi the audience perceives is a projection of Mary's imagination but Stephenson has used the 'ghost' convention with dramatic licence to provide a more fully 'fleshed-out' character as it were than just a cipher for Mary's thoughts and memories.

What is interesting about the structure of the play is the significant use of duologue scenes to develop the details of each character's story. Teresa and Mary both have scenes with each other and their respective partners, Frank and Mike, providing the opportunity to explore their personal relationships as well as the way in which Vi's death has affected them. Catherine's character, on the other hand, is revealed in less intimate scenes. Her first scene is with Mary and Teresa and they try to do what they seem always to have done, which is to ignore her. This detail has a comic effect because the things she says and does are quite outrageous and the fact that her sisters react with unperturbed resignation is a further source of amusement for the audience. Catherine is the only character who has a monologue, when she is praying to the phone at the beginning of Act Two, Scene Two, which underlines her lack of a significant other and her isolation from her elder sisters. Her attempt to use Frank as a shoulder to cry on (pp. 72–4) is totally inappropriate and, as the stage direction puts it, he sees her as 'an unexploded bomb' and interprets her actions as seduction. The only other duologue scene Catherine has is with Teresa (pp. 78–80), which consists of Catherine commenting on the size of Vi's coffin and Teresa telling her that she is better off without Xavier. Catherine also makes the telling observation that Frank looks remarkably like their father: 'You go through all the palaver of whittling out the dross and you end up married to your dad' (p. 80).

The narrative consists of four intertwining stories each associated with the four female characters. Vi's love of dancing and of male company in the 1960s, her mental decline with Alzheimer's disease and her eventual death is

the common thread which brings the other three stories together. Mary's is a complex story about the child she had as a teenager and her hopeless longing for a child in later life. This is complicated by the fact that she is the mistress of Mike who, it becomes fairly apparent, is not prepared to make a full commitment and leave his wife for her. Teresa has been her mother's carer and her second marriage to Frank has been built upon dishonesty on both sides. However, during the course of the play, Frank finds the nerve to say what he really feels and the signs are that they might well give up on the health supplements business and run a pub together. Catherine's story is about a life built on false hopes and about someone who cannot distinguish between sex and love. She spends all of Act One stoned and hoping that Xavier, her latest lover, will phone to say that he is on his way to the funeral. In Act Two, he phones to break the news that not only is he not coming to the funeral but that their relationship is over. The only hope for her is that, having never really grown up, her mother's death will help her to develop a more adult approach to life.

Characters

Vi

Vi is a 'virtual' character: there and yet not there. She is a projection of Mary's imagination and a memory of how she was thirty years earlier. In her physical appearance, Vi is Mary's manifestation from the perspective of a fourteen-year-old child but Mary communicates with her as a mature adult. Vi is the link with the past and what has brought the sisters together. She is a spectral character, represented for the audience as 'sexy, immaculately made up, her hair perfectly coiffed'. The dress she is seen wearing is from around 1962, so the audience is witnessing the behaviour and actions of a woman aged around forty-five who belongs to an entirely different era from the other characters in the play. She is a cigarette smoker, for instance, which was standard for her generation unlike for Mary and hers.

It is significant that the play takes place in Vi's bedroom, in which time seems to have stood still: the furniture was bought in the 1950s and gives the room a period feel. Mary is sleeping in her mother's old bed but she is relieved to know her mother did not die in it. The house seems to be attached to a hardware shop, which was the family business, and Vi gives the impression of being destined for far more than being stuck behind the counter and a mother of three girls. Vi's dress sense is conveyed through the clothes that the daughters strip out of the wardrobe ('a gaudy floral number', 'a sixties cocktail frock', 'a wild pink dress circa 1963') and suggests that she was someone who liked to wear clothes that were in vogue ('her Alma Cogan phase'). There is an implication that Vi liked to dress to attract the attention of men because she was trapped in a loveless and tedious marriage. She might have been having an affair with someone called Norman Patterson who has an allotment and who describes her in his sympathy card as 'a wonder woman'. Mary's memory of her mother on Saturday nights was of her dressed up and smelling of 'cigarettes and face powder and something alcoholic, and this [cheap] perfume [Phul Nana]' (p. 27).

In Act One, Vi appears only briefly at the beginning and, for a fleeting moment, in the photographic tableau at the end, yet her presence is felt throughout the exposition of the play. Mary explains to Teresa that she keeps having dreams about their mother and she describes the Vi who appears in the play: 'She's about fortyish and she's wearing that green taffeta dress' (p. 26). Vi, it seems, was deeply concerned with her daughters' appearance but unable to speak to them about sex or prepare them for the onset of puberty and the use of sanitary towels. 'I don't know how she managed to give birth to three daughters and then send us into the world so badly equipped. She'd have sent us up K2 in slingbags. With matching handbags' (p. 27). Teresa provides a picture of Vi from the more recent past and of what she was like after the onset of Alzheimer's disease, because she was the one living closest and caring for her. Teresa describes how 'she was getting more and more confused. Everything was

packing up' (p. 20) and that 'she was mad as a snake' (p. 24). She was seventy-five when she died.

Vi's scene at the beginning of Act Two gives more insights into her past life and her relationship with Mary. She speaks with disapproval about the way Mary looks and dresses but her words are tinged with envy. In a way Vi was born a generation too early: she would have loved the kind of sexual freedom that she sees Mary experiencing. Perhaps there is also a sense of guilt about Mary's teenage pregnancy and an even deeper sense of guilt about the fact that she has kept from her the news of Mary's son's death at the age of twenty-one. Vi is deliberately unhelpful and evasive about the whereabouts of the 'chrysanthemum tin' because, as we discover later, it contains the newspaper clipping announcing that the son Mary thought was still alive was killed when a cliff collapsed.

Vi says that she never cared much for other women as friends but that 'all the men loved me'. One of the dresses triggers a memory of her husband when she says 'It was the only dress your father bought me' (p. 50), suggesting that any romance there was in her marriage very soon faded. Their marriage seems to have been based on Vi making sure that her husband had a quiet life and that everything was all right with the world. Vi went out of her way to keep from him the fact that Mary was pregnant: 'Hiding it all from Dad [...] all those lies about peritonitis and hospitals and God knows what' (p. 65). Vi used to love to go out dancing because she enjoyed the attention of men, the kind of attention that she no longer received from her husband: 'She [Vi] dyed her hair red, d'you remember that? Dad didn't even notice. Didn't say a word [...] he didn't bloody care. We could have had three heads and he'd not have noticed' (p. 63). Just as Vi wouldn't discuss anything about sex with her daughters, she avoided talking about such things to her husband, preferring to make him think that Mary was ill rather than pregnant.

Vi says, 'I know wanting and no choice' (p. 53) and this is a very telling remark about her situation bringing up three daughters. She is saying that for her generation the only

choice was marriage and motherhood when she would have preferred the kind of life that Mary has: a career and a wide choice of male partners. Vi cannot understand the way her daughters have turned out and that, despite the fact that she spent most of her life looking after them, in her old age they have had little time for her. 'You've no patience with me. No tolerance. And I had years of patience with you. It's not fair' (p. 52). It is as if she expected her daughters to be like her but, even though she gave birth to them, they are complete strangers to her. According to Oscar Wilde, 'All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy', and there is an element of truth about this in that, although Vi sees her daughters trying to be different, even in Mary's case she is more like Vi than she would like to think: 'I look at you and I see myself' (p. 54). This is complicated by the fact that it is Vi in Mary's dream saying this and almost as though she is convincing herself that she is not so different from her mother, that her mother will always be with her in spirit at least.

From Teresa's drunken outburst, we learn a lot more about what Vi was like and how she effectively ran the household. In forty-eight years of marriage, their father did not speak much and did anything for a quiet life. Vi was prepared to defend her husband, even though he was having an affair with another woman and, according to Teresa, she never said a word against him. But Teresa, of course, is providing a memory of what her parents' marriage was like from a child's perspective and it all seems to have been about keeping up appearances. As an adult, Teresa has come to the conclusion that her parents' marriage was far from perfect. Vi was the product of a Catholic upbringing and belonged to a generation which believed that divorce was not an option and a husband and wife should stay together at all costs. There must have been some initial attraction between Vi and her husband and they must have started out loving one another. Their marriage produced three children but for Vi it was a relationship without passion and excitement and she might well have just kept it going for the sake of it or for the sake

of the children. At the end of the play she says ‘I forgave your father’, which suggests that she knew all along about his affair with another woman.

Vi’s final appearance is when the coffin containing her remains is lying in the room, but this time she has completely white hair. She looks into the coffin and does not recognise herself as an old woman. She is indignant about the fact that her corpse is wearing ‘green frosted eye shadow’, as though it is a colour she would never have chosen to wear. In some ways Vi’s final scene is more about Mary than her mother because it is all about Mary coming to terms with her mother’s death. Mary’s rationalisation for why Vi gave her child away and kept the news about his death from her is that Vi never knew how she felt about things. Mary’s apparition of Vi says, ‘I thought nothing could shake you. I was wrong’, and it is as though Mary gives her mother absolution for never having apologised to her because she herself shut her mother out. Vi’s final moments describe the fragmentation of her memories and how she started to forget who she was. It is interesting that her family does not feature strongly in her final memories and that what remained with her to the end of her life was her love of dancing, men and songs.

I felt like I’d gone away. Like I’d broken up into islands and in between was just a terrible muddle of old songs and odd names drifting by, men I vaguely recognised. I felt like a cut-up thing. But sometimes the pieces would float to the surface, drift back together, and there I was, washed ashore from a pitch-black sea of nothing. Me. Still me. I’m still here. (p. 85)

Mary

Mary is the middle daughter, aged thirty-nine, and works as a doctor specialising in neurology. All three daughters have good catholic names, but according to Stephenson, she chose names that were classless and could be from any generation. Though named after a saint, like the others, Mary is far from being saintly. She is the most complex of the characters and the one who is most central to the

drama. She is literally placed centre stage, because she inhabits the room in which the play is set and is sleeping in her mother's bed. Mary is the only character who connects with Vi and speaks to her, because the on-stage representation of the girls' mother is in Mary's imagination and is the Vi she remembers. Mary is the most intellectual, the most educated and the most serious of the three sisters. Mary is the one, certainly when portrayed by both Samantha Bond (in the West End production) and Joanne Whalley (in the film version) who has lost her northern accent and affected a way of speaking associated with the English educated middle class. Where Teresa and Catherine are portrayed as comic, with their often ridiculous behaviour brought on by alcohol or dope, Mary is much more sophisticated and witty and has the sharpest lines of dialogue and the clever and often sarcastic turns of phrase. Mary's view of the way Teresa sees herself as the one who had to cope with their dying mother is a good example of this: 'I'm sure when they publish a new edition of *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* they'll devote a chapter entirely to you' (p. 24).

Mary is emotionally and physically tired from the beginning and is trying to get some sleep, but she is woken from her dream about Vi by Mike telephoning her and Teresa asking questions. We first see Mary wearing sunglasses in bed like some movie star keeping the world at bay: in fact she is wearing them so that she can keep the bedside light on and still get some sleep. Mary's preoccupation from the start is with the 'green tin box with chrysanthemums on', which contains the birth certificate and documents about the child she had when she was fourteen and who was given away for adoption. The memory of the child consumes her and she believes that she is pregnant again. As a single professional woman approaching the menopause, she is obsessed with the idea of having a child to the point that, for her, it almost becomes a reality. The irony is that the man she has chosen, Mike, neither wants any more children nor can have any because he has had a vasectomy. She describes the extent of her obsession with the child she had as a teenager:

I'm putting my name on a register, so that if he's looking for me, he'll find me. I don't even know what he looks like. I have to make him up. I sit on tubes looking at twenty-five-year-old boys, and I think, maybe that's him. Ever since he went I've been looking for him, but he's like ether, I can't get hold of him.

She unfolds a piece of paper.

Oh, thank God. Thank God it's still here. Here he is. Oh, look, Patrick. Patrick James. My boy. I wanted to call him Heathcliff. I was fourteen. I still thought life was a novel. (*She reads.*) 'Sex: boy. Name: Patrick James. Weight: six pounds four ounces.' This is all I've got left of him. (pp. 74–5)

Mary makes her mark on her mother's room by the way her open suitcase is left half unpacked on the floor and she has placed a half-full bottle of whisky and a pile of books on the bedside table. Mary's idea of bedtime reading is a heavy tome on medical matters and Teresa paints a picture of her as a child doing her homework, 'Dissecting frogs. Skinning live rabbits. Strangling cats. The usual'. Both personally and professionally Mary and Teresa are complete opposites; they have a relationship built on bickering and have to agree to differ on almost everything. Mary is a scientist and practicing conventional medicine while Teresa runs a business that provides alternative remedies. In Teresa's eyes, Mary chose to put her sick patients before her own mother which suggests that she is driven by her career rather than family loyalty.

Teresa says of Mary, 'You've a completely closed mind, it infuriates me. You're so supercilious.' There is an air of superiority about Mary which presumably comes from her education and the intelligence that has enabled her to become a doctor. She has a certain manner and tone of voice which is different to her sisters, who are more down-to-earth. Even Catherine bites back at Mary's manner: 'Why d'you always have to do this sneery superior thing?' Mary uses black humour in a way that the other sisters do not. Again this is symptomatic of working in the medical profession where it is commonplace to deal with bodily parts and fluids and death. Saying something like 'I found a

toenail before . . . I thought I might keep it in a locket round my neck' (p. 7) is quite distasteful for most people, but to Mary it is humorous and her way of coping with the situation. Later on when Teresa asks her to select flowers for the funeral, Mary chooses lilies of the valley to which, in life, Vi was allergic. Mary cannot help herself and turns this into a joke by replying, 'She's hardly going to start sneezing at her own funeral, is she?' (p. 56).

As a scientist Mary is in search of the objective truth about cause and effect. Her attitude, like a lot of the medical profession, to the kind of remedies that Teresa sells is one of scepticism, because there is no scientific proof that they work. Her training has taught her to be confident about her own diagnosis of a patient's symptoms and the drugs that she prescribes. This is what Teresa is referring to when she says to Mary, 'You're always so certain when it comes to things you know nothing about' (p. 14). Teresa's view of Mary is as prejudiced as Mary's is of Teresa and, despite being sisters, they will probably never be on the same wavelength. Mary is obviously dedicated to her work which is evident from the pile of medical books she has brought with her and her request that Mike brings a particular research paper with him about memory loss. Mike thinks that she has an obsession with her patient who has amnesia and we later find out that this is because he reminds Mary of the son she had:

I look at this patient of mine. This twenty-year-old boy lying in a hospital bed, completely blank, no memory of anything at all, just an empty vessel. All I see is Patrick. Full of memories that I didn't put there, that someone else filed him with. And I think, did I give him anything? Is there some part of him that's still mine? Maybe he smiles like me. Maybe he doesn't. (p. 84)

Paul Taylor in his *Independent* review (12 January 1999) describes how Samantha Bond 'brings a fine caustic superciliousness and air of heartache to the role of Mary, the high-flying doctor and victim of her own success who harbours a boyfriend who will not leave his sick wife and a void left by the baby she was forced to give up at the age of

fourteen. Bond is perhaps a little generalised and over actressy – her pukka tones rarely relapsing, as they would, to Mary's original northern accent in moments of unguarded emotional intensity. But she is a credible irritant to her siblings.' This is obviously only one interpretation of the role, but the impression that Bond's performance conveyed to the audience of this mixture of the tough and sharp professional who is resilient to showing her real emotions with the vulnerable and melancholic individual who has had a complicated childhood and personal life are the essential ingredients of Mary's character. Vi admits that, 'I thought nothing could shake you. I was wrong.' Of the three sisters, Mary is the one whose relationships are most deeply explored on stage: with her sisters, with her lover (Mike) and with her mother (albeit her own imagined ghost figure). Teresa's relationships with her sisters and her husband, Frank, are also portrayed on stage but Catherine just has the relationships with her sisters, her personal life being played off stage at the end of a telephone in Spain.

For Mary, the only solid relationship she has is with her sisters, although she would probably never want to admit it. Mary has two ghosts from her childhood which both need putting to rest: her relationship with her mother and the fate of the boy to whom she gave birth. In addition to this, there is the uncertainty surrounding her position as 'the other woman' in Mike's life. The question of whether or not he intends to leave his wife and make their relationship a more permanent one is brought into sharp relief because of Mary's announcement that she is pregnant by him. These are three fairly significant and weighty matters that have to be resolved for Mary during the course of the play. Mary has both a 'ghost mother' and a 'ghost baby', inextricably linked because it was Vi who decided that the baby should be given away so her bright, academic daughter would not be burdened with a child who would inhibit her chances to pursue a career. We are given the impression that Vi was determined that Mary would have all the chances and opportunities to be the kind of person that Vi herself wanted to be but which, coming from her generation, she could not

achieve. In turn, Mary has spent her life trying not to be like her mother. This is all part of the complex relationship between mothers and daughters and the way children strive to be different from their parents even though genetically they inevitably have something in common with them. Mary has retained her independence and has chosen a man she feels is right for her even though he is already married. Presumably during her twenties and early thirties she was more focused on her career than on her personal life and finding a life partner was not a priority. Now that she is approaching forty the only options Mary sees available are 'tiny little trainspotters in grey shoes, maniacs, alcoholics, men who wear their underpants for a week' (p. 76).

While the representation of Vi as a ghost can be seen as a purely theatrical device it also serves as a psychological context for Mary. The ghostly presentation of Vi on stage provides Stephenson with a means of giving the audience a three-dimensional view of the character but the Vi that the audience sees and hears is a Vi according to Mary, not a Vi according to Teresa or Catherine or anyone else for that matter. If Vi's words are really Mary's she seems to recognise that she paid little attention to her mother's advice and went out of her way to be fiercely independent: 'Don't walk away from me! You've done that all your life' (p. 51). Vi describes Mary's lifestyle as being hedonistic in that it has been all about sex, trips to Paris, champagne and Italian shoes. Since the onstage Vi is Mary's own memory of her mother and she is metaphorically putting words into Vi's mouth, there may be some truth in what she says but equally it could be what she thinks her mother believes her lifestyle to have been when in fact it has been far more sedate and bookish. Mary seems to think that her mother is incredulous about the daughter to whom she gave birth: Vi says, 'I look at your easiness with the world and I don't know how I spawned you' (p. 53) but, as we later learn, this is more about Mary making every effort to be as unlike her mother as possible. The scenes with Vi are effectively a form of psychoanalysis for Mary in that her ghostly mother becomes the sounding board and reflection of her own

internal thoughts and analysis. Vi says that Mary has no humility and it is as if the three events, comprising the death of her mother, her yearning for a baby and her treatment of the young male patient who reminds her of her son, have conjoined in a moment of self-realisation that has brought her back down-to-earth with something of a bump. When Vi says, 'I've watched you being offered the world on a plate. And all of it you've taken, without a backwards glance' (p. 53), it is as if Mary has recognised her own self-absorption and lack of time and patience with others, particularly with her family.

Mary's memories of her mother also include more practical everyday advice such as, 'You need a bit of colour on your face. You were always pasty', and 'I do wish you'd wear something a bit more feminine occasionally', further reflecting the difference in their priorities and Mary's reaction against her mother's. In the final scene, having spent the evening in a hotel, she returns for the funeral dressed smartly, even causing Teresa to comment that she looks lovely. However, she is also described as looking 'white and drawn', a consequence of the lack of sleep and emotional turmoil that she has been through.

Of all the daughters, Mary seems to be the one most like her mother and the one for whom her mother had the most time. Theirs was obviously a difficult relationship in which each recognised the other's similarity while not wanting to acknowledge it. Vi makes the point that Mary has spent her life denying that she is anything like her mother and has fashioned a version of herself which she has presented to the world but, however hard she tries to be different, the similarities are still there:

Why can't you see it? Everyone else can. Look at the curve of your cheek, look at your hands, the way they move. You're doing it now. That's me. I got it from my mother. She got it from her mother. And on it goes . . . don't try and reinvent yourself with me. (p. 54)

Teresa and Catherine provide much of the comic relief in the play through their bizarre and often outrageous antics

with only the occasional moments of pathos. Mary, on the other hand, is a far more serious character and the more tragic mood of the play comes about through her interactions with Vi and the rather shell-shocked Mike, who is meeting her sisters for the first time and dealing with the news that Mary is pregnant. It is not long after Mike arrives, having been out in the cold and snow for some time, that Mary lets him know exactly how she feels about her current situation:

I feel humiliated! I've rationalised, I've philosophised, I've come to terms with the fact that I'm living in some nether world with different rules where we don't do Christmas, we don't do bank holidays, and if you die I'll be the last to find out. I accept this because your wife's supposed to be incapable of crossing the street on her own, and now I discover her hopping round a dance floor like a bag of ferrets. I know I'm not supposed to feel things like humiliation or fury or jealousy because they're irrational but sometimes I do, sometimes I just do, ok? (p. 34)

The irony is that it is a family event, Vi's funeral, that has brought Mike to the family home and into contact with Mary's sisters and his potential brother-in-law, Frank. It is just as well that Mary does not hear Frank's advice to Mike, which is 'don't leave your wife. You don't want to marry into this lot. It's worse than the Borgias' (p. 66). Mary's phantom pregnancy is symptomatic of her longing for a child but it is also a test of Mike's genuine intent to leave his wife. Mary does not feel secure in her relationship with Mike and the introduction of the pregnancy could be in part to force the issue and make him choose between her and his wife and children. The effect on Mike is part panic but also incredulity because, as far as he is concerned, making Mary pregnant is an impossibility since he has had a vasectomy. Mary is incensed by the fact that Mike has never told her about the vasectomy but she was equally afraid of telling him that she wanted children in case he left her. If Mary knows from the start that she is not pregnant, there is a slight vindictiveness about the way in which she persists with her jokes about Charlie Morgan, the inept and drunken

surgeon who performed Mike's vasectomy. Throughout the scene when they are packing up Vi's clothes, Mary snipes at Mike by saying things like, 'Just lie down and die, will you?' and 'Charlie-whoops-I've-made-a-bit-of-a-hash-of-this-Morgan'. Mary persists in her anger at Mike in Act Two, Scene Two, and he makes it patently clear to her that he does not want a child. It is at this point that Mary fully realises that Mike only wants her for sex and that he does not want a relationship that means 'three children and Sainsbury's every Saturday for the next thirty years' (p. 75). The future of their relationship is doomed from the moment Mike says, 'But obviously, you know, if you *are* pregnant, I'll stick by you.'

In the closing moments of the play, Mary presents Mike with an ultimatum: 'I'm going to ask it once and I'll never ask it again. Leave you wife and come with me.' Whatever it is Mary wants to do with her future, it seems almost certain that she is going to be doing it without Mike. Her closing lines provide a poetic contrast between winter and summer. Mary has always loved the sun and warm places and enjoyed life to the full but she faces a much bleaker future. Perhaps it is Mary who feels the loss of her mother the most and why Vi's ghost visits *her* and not Teresa or Catherine.

Teresa

Teresa is the eldest of the three sisters and the one who has remained closest to the family home. She is about the same age as the forty-something manifestation of her mother Vi: she was certainly not 'coming up thirty' (p. 68) as she advertised herself in a lonely-hearts column when she met Frank. As the eldest, she is proof of the theory that parents are strictest with their first-born: she is the most conventional and responsible of the three daughters. She is the only one who has been married and had a child of her own (Lucy), but even she is on her second relationship, with Frank. From the very first scene with Mary, it is apparent that Teresa says what she thinks and this becomes exaggerated even more when she is under the influence of

alcohol and lets down her guard completely.

Saint Teresa is the patron saint of headaches, sickness and bodily ills. Ironically, she is also the patron saint for the loss of parents. As Teresa runs a business which supplies remedies, there is a connection with her saintly name but this is about as far as it goes. Catherine sarcastically refers to Teresa as St Teresa of Avila (p. 41) when Teresa tries to make out that if it were not for her nothing would get done, which to some extent is true. Teresa is a born organiser and likes to be in charge and in control of things. Teresa has been the one who has made the funeral arrangements and who occupies herself with sorting out the cards and ordering the flowers. Teresa's way of dealing with her bereavement is to be busy and to fuss around like a mother hen. As the eldest, she has stepped into her mother's shoes, giving Mary advice about her relationship with Mike she did not ask for and treating Catherine as though she was still a child.

Teresa has had very little sleep, so she spends much of the play in a state of nervous exhaustion. She complains that everything she eats and drinks tastes of salt. In order to try and stay calm she keeps taking Rescue Remedy and recites recipes, all of which disguises the fact that she does not know how to express what she feels. She resents that she has had to deal with Violet in her final years while Mary has been living a professional life elsewhere and Catherine has been away in Spain, taking no responsibility for their mother whatsoever: 'You two managed to avoid it pretty comprehensively when it came to Mum. Most of the time you weren't even here' (p. 21). There is also the natural process of having to deal with the death of her mother and the complex emotions associated with grief and loss.

There is undoubtedly a certain amount of sibling rivalry between Teresa and Mary. It is the fate of all first-born children to start their life in the world with the undivided attention of their parents and suddenly to find that they have to share that affection with a younger brother or sister. Teresa might have felt displaced by Mary because she found that her younger sister was more intelligent than she was. One of Teresa's gripes about Mary is that nothing was

allowed to disturb Mary's studies so that she could do well at school and become a doctor. Teresa is the one who is most like her mother in running a local business and a family home, while her younger sisters have a more carefree lifestyle. Mary says of Teresa, 'You've got that slight edge in your voice. Like a blunt saw', that describes the disapproving way Teresa speaks. It is clear that Teresa does not approve of Mary having an affair with another woman's husband because she herself has been in the position of the wife who has been cheated on. Teresa has a certain empathy with Mike's wife, Chrissie, and goes as far as to say that she does not believe that Chrissie has ME. This is based upon her own behaviour faking illness to get attention from her wayward husband whom she suspected was having an affair: 'I've done it. I've got ill so people would be nice to me. I used to do it to my ex-husband. Sometimes it's all that's left to you. You get ill for a reason. You do it so people won't go' (p. 62).

It is said that drinking brings out the worst in people and, as Frank says, Teresa excels herself after a few swigs of whisky by revealing all of the family secrets, including the fact of Mary's pregnancy at the age of fourteen. Mary's view of Teresa is that she is a 'stupid, unimaginative woman' (p. 64) and she knows 'bugger all about bugger all' (p. 13). Both of these things are said when Mary is annoyed and angry with Teresa but, like most things said in the heat of the moment, there is an element of truth about the way Teresa comes across. She is bossy rather than authoritative and it is this aspect of her character to which Mary alludes. Their relationship is based on bickering because it is something they have done all of their lives: Mary wanting to have a logical argument and Teresa always wanting to be right.

Teresa's relationship with Catherine is more like that of mother and daughter in that, for Teresa, Catherine has always been the annoying younger sister who gets her own way. Presumably, it was Teresa who was the babysitter when Catherine was a child because there is a ten- to fifteen-year age gap between them. Teresa is definitely the most practical of the three sisters, where Mary is the

intellectual and Catherine the free-spirited one. At one point Teresa says, ‘Somebody has to be practical! Somebody has to be in charge, you two can live in chaos but I can’t’: this marks out the difference between her and her younger siblings in that she tries to live an ordered and routine life. She has organised her mother’s clothes to be bagged up and sent to Zimbabwe. However, even in this respect, Teresa’s thinking does not extend beyond the level of clearing up in that she does not immediately see the absurdity of sending outlandish 1960s ballroom frocks to the poor in southern Africa.

In the time that Vi has not been the head of the household, Teresa has assumed this role and she believes that ‘If it wasn’t for me nothing would get done. She’d [Catherine] be lying on the floor stoned out of her brains, you’d [Mary] be having it off in our mother’s bed and I’d be holding the fort’ (p. 41). Bossiness is her natural character trait so, for example, when Frank ignores her request to take the bags of clothes out to the car she becomes monosyllabic: ‘Frank. Bags. Car. Now’ (p. 55). Teresa’s way of coping with their mother’s death is to be busy to displace her feelings. She says that she has not been able to cry for three days and she has bottled up her emotions until they are released by drinking whisky.

Teresa is a woman of extremes. She believes in herbal remedies that help control the emotions, she is herself a highly controlled woman but we also know that alcohol releases her inhibitions and makes her behave bizarrely. Frank recalls how she took her clothes off in a car park after drinking vodka and everyone is able to witness her behaviour once the whisky takes hold of her in Act Two, Scene Two. Teresa’s drinking scene (pp. 60–72) requires a *tour de force* of acting and most of the reviews of the West End production singled out Alison Steadman’s performance in this respect. Mike becomes the first target of Teresa’s sharp tongue when she turns on him and questions his morals for having an affair with her sister: ‘This is rich, this is, coming from you, the man who’s been two-timing his wife for the last five years telling us how to behave’ (p. 60). Teresa sums

up what she feels all three of them are like: 'We're our mother's daughters. Always take the man's side even when he's a complete pile of crap' (p. 62). She is obviously speaking from bitter personal experience, but what she says is evident in the way that Catherine has no luck with men, the fact that Mary has tolerated being 'the other woman' in Mike's marriage and Teresa herself has suffered in her first marriage. The drink really gets to Teresa and her mask slips completely when she describes their father: 'He was a professional mute. And fucking someone else most of the time' (p. 62). It does not just stop there as she goes on to let out the family secret that Mary was pregnant at the age of fourteen and their mother did everything she could to keep it from their father.

The results of the drink are to bring about a dialogue between Frank and Teresa that enables them to communicate on an even footing for once. Teresa has chosen Frank to be her husband in the way that she would choose an item from a catalogue and has assumed that he is happy to do the things she wants him to do. Their relationship is built on untruths, but on untruths that are not so important that they are not right for each other. Teresa lied about her age and Frank lied about his height in the lonely-hearts advertisements they both placed, but this did not prevent them from marrying. Frank's revelation that he has always hated Woody Allen films makes Teresa overreact by saying, 'I've been married to a stranger –', but what is more important is that when asked by her if he has been having an affair you can believe him when he says, 'I'm not having an affair. I haven't got the energy . . .' (p. 70). The wonderful irony of the scene, of course, is that having seen the effect that alcohol has on Teresa, Frank says he wants to give up selling remedies to run a pub.

Teresa has the last laugh to some extent because she has arranged to have the coffin brought to the house the night before the funeral, which puts her back in control. In the final scene, there is a glimpse of the caring side of Teresa because, having berated Mike for two-timing his wife, she suddenly takes Mary's side and says, 'Oh, why don't you

two have a baby? Why don't you? Leave your wife and have a baby with Mary –' (p. 87). However, it is also a fairly insensitive thing to say at that particular moment, given the emotional state that Mary is in. When Catherine gets upset in the closing scene, it is Teresa who puts her arm around her younger sister to comfort her. Right to the end, though, Teresa is still the one barking out orders as she calls to Mary from off stage, her voice cutting through Mary's parting dialogue with Mike.

Catherine

At thirty-three years of age, Catherine is the youngest of Vi's children. Before she even arrives on the scene, a hint is given of her character by the fact that she has been out all night and by Teresa's belief that 'she'd have probably drunk four bottles of cider and been brought home in a police car. And then she'd have been sick all over the television'. This suggestion is based upon Catherine's actual behaviour when she was thirteen and the implication is that she has not changed much. The theory that parents relax their discipline with their younger children is certainly true in the case of Catherine who was a wild child and, with the help of drink and drugs, is an untamed adult. The gap of six years between Catherine and Mary and the span of over a decade between Catherine and Teresa means that her elder sisters had started school when she was a baby. Catherine claims to have been overlooked as a child and left behind after a family holiday. However, according to Mary this story has been appropriated by Catherine when it was actually Mary who was left on the beach. Having been ignored as an infant, Catherine seems to have developed a form of behaviour that means that she is always clamouring for attention. There is also an element of provocativeness about her that suggest she might exaggerate her behaviour to get a rise out of her sisters.

Unlike her sisters, Catherine has no one outside the family to confide in and the sadness of her character is that, because she is so forward and demanding, she ends up

driving people away. Her analyst has told her that she gives too much to other people, 'I'm just a giving person, and I never get any credit for any of it' (p. 58), but neither Mary nor Teresa have any sympathy with this view. Mary cannot believe that 'anyone in their right mind [could] tell Catherine her problem was give, give, give', and Teresa is even less tolerant when she says, 'I'm sick of people feeling sorry for her. It's very easy the first time you meet her, but if you put up with her year in year out, you just want to kill her' (p. 59). The pity of Catherine's character is that she has lost her handle on reality, which is not helped by the amount of dope she has smoked in her time.

The one trait she has inherited from her mother is her love of male company and her dislike of women, and she is playing out a lifestyle of drugs, sex and parties that Vi might have enjoyed but which the responsibilities of a husband and three daughters prevented her from experiencing. Catherine's problem is her inappropriate behaviour towards men, of which we get a taste when she seeks comfort in the arms of Frank. From this scene, where she hugs and tries to kiss her brother-in-law, it is quite understandable how she has ended up having sex with seventy-eight men, although whether this is accurate is unlikely. After so many sexual partners, none of whom have stuck around for very long, any rational human being might be able to answer Catherine's own questions: 'What is it with men? Why d'you always have to misread the signals?' (p. 74). Despite having had an average of five different men a year for most of her adult life, with her sisters having little or no patience for her and with no female friends to speak of, Catherine is lonely: 'What am I supposed to do? Teresa's got Frank, you've [Mary] got him [Mike], and what am I supposed to do on my own? I don't want to sit in the living-room on my own while everyone else has smoochy secret conversations, it's not fair, not at a time like this' (p. 57). Her way of dealing with the situation on this occasion is to shut herself in the wardrobe. Again, not the sort of behaviour one would expect from a thirty-three-year-old.

1 The Memory of Water

Catherine's entrance is an outlandish performance in itself. The tone, timbre and volume of her initial offstage 'Hi!' is enough to cause Mary to exclaim 'Oh God'. Catherine '*bursts in*', hands full of carrier bags, having been shopping, which she has used as a displacement activity. She gushes into a speech which is almost entirely in the first person and moves from one subject to another: weather, cab driver, her stomach pain. She says 'I' almost twenty times in as many lines. Mary's comment that 'there's a time and place for everything' signals the inappropriateness of Catherine's behaviour both in general and in relation to their mother's funeral. Teresa adds that she thinks it is insensitive of Catherine to have stayed out all night drinking rather than being with the family. Catherine's way of dealing with her mother's death is to tell everybody, including the taxi driver, and to occupy herself with her obsessive shoe-buying. Even the way she shops is done irresponsibly since she has no money but is prepared to buy things on her credit card. Catherine's view of herself is that she has low self-esteem and that she is always being told to 'bugger off' or made to feel she does not count. What she does not see is how annoying her behaviour is after a while and that, contrary to her own perception she has 'an ego the size of Asia Minor' (Mary, p. 12).

Everything Catherine does seems to be about attracting attention, particularly the attention of men. She wears garish clothes and shoes that look stylish but are far from practical. Even the outfit she has chosen for the funeral is totally inappropriate if Teresa's and Mary's comments about it are anything to go by: 'It's halfway up your bottom' (Teresa) and 'Apart from the fact you can see your ovaries, it's fine' (Mary, p. 88). Catherine's life, led on the edge of obsession and fuelled by her intake of alcohol and chemical substances, means she has few, if any, inhibitions. With no sense of decorum and little social awareness, she is intrinsically comic. Mike is the only one who voices any sympathy for Catherine, saying that she obviously has a problem and is 'pretty miserable and not very stable'. It is Catherine's unpredictability and instability that make

people give her a wide berth and why she tries her sisters' patience. Catherine is the kid sister with whom her elder sisters have to put up, which she recognises, saying, 'This is what you do to me. This permanent, constant, endless belittling'. She copes with life by trying to shut it out by smoking joints, to the extent that even her memories have become fictionalised and inaccurate. Catherine may think she had a horrible childhood but to Mary she has always been an egomaniac and Teresa says that from 'the amount of chemicals you've had through your system, I'm surprised you can remember anything at all' (p. 23). Catherine is right to think that her sisters are always putting her down, because it is the only way they have been able to put up with her. What she does not seem to realise is that those closest to her are likely to be telling her the truth about herself and that perhaps she should start to ask herself why they feel the way they do about her.

Her therapist has told her that she's very pretty, good fun, a very special person and a brilliant cook, which are all laudable qualities. What she does not recognise are the reasons why her seventy-eighth or -ninth boyfriend, Xavier, has ended their relationship and does not want to be with her at her mother's funeral. Perhaps if Catherine listened to Teresa's advice she might have more luck with men in the future: 'Forget him. He's a bastard [...] You've never had a boyfriend who isn't. You don't go about it the right way' (p. 79).

There are moments in the play, though, when it is Catherine's childlike behaviour that reminds her sisters that their mother is dead. Catherine is the one who is able to say forthrightly, 'Our mother's just died'. She is the one whose emotions are at the surface and she is able to cry very early on: 'God, is no one allowed to show their feelings around here? I'm depressed, I've suffered a bereavement, it's normal to cry, for God's sake' (p. 30). And she is perfectly right, however pathetic it may sound that all three of them are now orphans. In typical selfish fashion, Catherine sees it only from her own point of view and sees herself as suffering the most because she has known their mother for the least

time. However, her playfulness comes to the fore in the dressing-up scene and when she sees Mary dressed in their mother's green frock and says, 'You look dead like Mum', she literally brings the house down with the unintended pun.

In the second half of the play, her desperation and longing for Xavier to contact her is manifest in the way that she is seen praying for the telephone to ring. Despite being a lapsed Catholic, she even goes so far as to pray to the Virgin: 'Holy Mary Mother of God, I'll come back to the church, I'll do anything, make him ring now' (p. 54). It is as if she wants to prove her sisters wrong and that for once she has found a boyfriend who is going to stick around for a while. Even though Mary has witnessed Catherine pick up the phone and try to speak to Xavier, she lies to Teresa about him having phoned. The consequence of this is that she gets defensive when Frank asks her quite innocently whether Xavier ever met her mother: 'God, why does everyone in this house have to be so oblique and sneery, why can't anyone say what they mean?' (p. 55). The subtext of Catherine's paranoid behaviour is that, while hoping against hope that Xavier will hop on a plane to join her at the funeral, she knows in her heart of hearts that he has no intention of flying to England. When she gets off the phone from Xavier it is obvious to the other four people in the room and the audience that he has finished with her and, after an awkward silence, she tries to shrug off her disappointment by suddenly busying herself emptying out some drawers. From the way Catherine describes Xavier and dwells on his finer points it is fairly obvious that she loved him and thought he was going to last. Her rage boils up and childishly she hurls a tin across the room, which Frank later observes could have had his head off. Her monologue after her flood of tears is a heartrending lament about being left on the shelf and being lonely. Catherine rushes out of the room sobbing her heart out but neither of her sisters nor Frank and Mike follows after to console her. It is as though they have all accepted that it is just something Catherine does and just another example of her attention-grabbing histrionics.

In the closing moments of the play, Teresa shows that she does care about Catherine after all by putting her arm around her and making sure she goes with her and Frank. Having said earlier on that she didn't like her mother, Catherine admits when she is standing over the coffin that, 'I didn't hate her really', and is reassured by Mary who says, 'She didn't hate you either' (p. 91). However much of a pain she is, Catherine is after all Mary and Teresa's baby sister and the audience is left with the distinct feeling that, with their mother gone, the family ties will still bind them in the future.

Mike

Mike's position among the characters is an uneasy one. His presence is explained in that he is there to support Mary but, because he is her lover and married to someone else, his relationship to the family is more as an outsider than Frank. Mike is introduced early on in the play as it is him on the telephone at the start of Act One and he is the initial topic of conversation between Teresa and Mary. Teresa makes her views about Mike quite clear from the beginning and leaves no doubt in the audience's mind about the nature of the relationship between him and Mary: 'I'm presuming it's your boyfriend . . . How's his wife? . . . You can't sleep with him in that bed' (p. 3). This initial information provokes curiosity about him and heralds his unusual entrance through the window half way through Act One. For an actor playing the role, the problem is how to avoid being influenced by the preconceptions set up by Teresa in the audience's imagination of a man who is cheating on his wife. To some extent, the audience's reaction to Mike and equally to Mary will depend on an individual's moral stance and views on fidelity but the situation is made more complex in Mike's case by his public persona as a television doctor and the fact that his wife is supposedly suffering from a debilitating illness.

Mike has met Mary through their work as doctors in the same hospital and they have been together for five years.

Both have high-pressure jobs. Mike is the type of doctor who has something of the personality cult about him and he enjoys the celebrity status of being a television doctor. One of the interesting questions about him is the extent to which he is trying to have his cake and eat it: enjoying a stable family life with his wife Chrissie as well as having the excitement of an extra-marital affair with Mary. There is a suggestion that he might have been exaggerating the extent of his wife's illness because Mary has seen a picture of them both at a dance and he might well just be with Mary for the sex. Mike's reaction to Mary's announcement that she is pregnant is one of understandable surprise since he has had a vasectomy and he makes it absolutely clear that he has no desire to have any more children.

Mike must be relatively handsome, intelligent and charming in order for someone like Mary to be attracted to him. However, there is also something of the archetypal cad about him or why else would he think it acceptable to carry on a relationship with Mary? Mike's sexual passion demonstrated by his erection is soon deflated when Mary breaks the news of her pregnancy to him: 'Brilliant. I'm pregnant. Instant detumescence' (p. 38).

In a way, the circumstances of Vi's funeral and his introduction to Mary's family serve to force the issue about how committed Mike is to leaving his wife and family to set up home with Mary. Mary might have contrived the idea of being pregnant in order to test Mike, which in itself is a warning that their relationship is not based on trust or any firm foundations. What might have started out as a romantic attachment has suddenly become 'unreal. This is completely unreal. I don't believe this is happening' (Mike, p. 38). The irony in what Mike is saying is that up until now he has been living a lie. The consequence of Mary being pregnant with his child is a reality he never thought he would have to face. Mike is very quick to put the burden of responsibility on to Mary and asks her what she intends to do about the pregnancy, which is hardly the reaction of someone who is devoted to his lover and prepared to support her in difficult circumstances. Mike says he loves Mary when he is asked but

when, in the closing moments of the play, she says, 'Leave your wife and come with me' (p. 92), he cannot bring himself to make the decision. At this point Mary no longer wants Mike to respond with 'maybe', he has been 'Mike Maybe' for the duration of their relationship and the ultimate conclusion is that he cannot give the definite answer that Mary wants to hear: as a result of this their relationship is reaching an inevitable conclusion.

There is something indecisive in Mike. During the scene when the sisters are trying on their mother's clothes he says, 'Maybe we should have another bag for the kind of in-betweens' (p. 43). This is typical of someone who has a tendency to sit on the fence and prefers compromise, a rather worrying character trait for a doctor who must spend much of his working life making life-and-death decisions. However, it is often the case that individuals who can make clear decisions in their professional lives are unable to do so in their personal lives: Mike seems to be this sort of person.

Mike comes in for attack from Teresa after she has had too many whiskies and she makes a point of telling him what she thinks of him, which in normal circumstances she would have kept to herself. Teresa can see Mike and Mary's relationship from the married woman's point of view because she has been in that position herself and there is probably some truth in her observation that 'There's nothing wrong with your wife, Mike . . . She knows you're having an affair and so she thinks if she's ill, you won't leave her' (p. 61). Teresa asks the awkward question which Mike has been trying to avoid answering: 'When are you going to do the decent thing? When are you going to leave your wife and marry my sister?' (p. 60). It is the working out of the answer to this question that is at the heart of Mike's story in the play: he has to make a decision about the future of his relationship with Mary but in not making it himself, Mary makes it for him. It is difficult to feel much sympathy for Mike and this might well be the function of his character. Although, in his defence, he does make it apparent how he sees his relationship with Mary, compared with his wife, children and patients:

It's not because I'm cold or selfish – at least no more than anyone else is – it's that I feel sucked dry by what people need from me – patients, Chrissie, the children. You're where I come to be equal, I come to you because you're not asking to be healed. (p. 76)

Mike is obviously a caring person and he fulfils this role both professionally and as a family man but with Mary he wants something different: a relationship that is satisfying and one that is essentially based more on sex than love. In the film version, *Before You Go*, Mike says to a clergyman on his television programme that 'without the fear of pregnancy, women can enjoy having sex as much as men' and when he is asked, 'What about love?', he replies, 'You can have great sex without love.' Mary's reaction to this is to turn the television off and to stop watching the programme. Mike views sex and love as quite distinct things and he wants the pleasure that having an illicit love affair brings. Mike enjoys the excitement of the relationship with Mary for what it is and her suggestion of normalising it by him leaving his wife means that after Vi's funeral he will have to look for someone other than Mary to be his equal.

Frank

I'm a middle-aged man with a health food business I don't believe in, and a normally teetotal wife who's taken to the bottle. I could say, have some ginseng tea, eat organic vegetables and learn to love yourself, but it's all a lot of bollocks. (p. 73)

Frank is the last character to be introduced to the audience but we hear about him as Teresa's husband quite early on. Teresa makes her first entrance because she has heard the phone ringing and thinks it is Frank. She says that she been expecting Frank to ring for over an hour and she is wondering where he has got to (p. 9). Teresa makes a point of telling Mary that she and Frank have a business to run and she makes it obvious that Frank was around when she needed him during the time that their mother was dying in

hospital. Frank was at the hospital with Teresa when she broke into hysterical laughter and she puts his shock at her behaviour down to the fact that ‘they’re not like us his family, they’ve got Italian blood. Someone dies, they cry. They don’t get confused and laugh’ (p. 18).

The audience take on Frank’s point of view as a relative outsider, when he eventually arrives near the end of Act One to witness a scene of three women in their mother’s 1950s/60s cocktail dresses rolling around on the bed in stoned hysteria. Frank expects his wife and two sisters-in-law to be upset and grief-stricken preparing for their mother’s funeral but instead he walks into a room filled with wild laughter. The audience is already fired up with laughter at the black humour triggered by Catherine’s line, ‘You look dead like Mum’, and this continues with Frank’s astonished reaction and look of disbelief expressed in his opening ‘What the fuck . . .?’

Frank uses the insanity of the situation to launch into a description of the ridiculously long journey he has had getting back from Düsseldorf. In very quick succession, Mike introduces himself, the sisters persuade Frank to take a photograph and he finds a kind of instant fellowship in meeting another male and someone outside the family when he warns, ‘they’re a handful when they get together. They just gang up, you’ll get used to it’ (p. 47). Frank goes along with all of this mayhem without even having a chance to take his coat off. It is not until Act Two that something of a fuller picture of him emerges but even then he is the most sketchily written of the six characters.

Frank is a ‘reactive’ character much of the time in that he is constantly responding to things that are happening and being said around him. He is not exactly the hen-pecked husband because although Teresa barks orders at him (‘Frank. Bags. Car. Now’) he is quick to turn around and make sure he has the last word (‘For Christ’s sake, Teresa, I’ve only just thawed out’). It must also be remembered that Frank arrives on the scene having not slept for over thirty-six hours and he is hardly in a patient state of mind. It is no wonder that he is bad-tempered. His lack of tact in telling

Catherine not to be 'so bloody paranoid' and to 'lay off the drugs' results in her throwing the tin in his direction and narrowly missing his head.

Frank hates being a salesman and selling health foods and his relationship with Teresa seems to be based on falsehoods. They met each other through a lonely-hearts column and although he said he was 'witty and entertaining and 5ft 11', Teresa suggests that he is none of those things. Their first date was a lie because he hated the film, *Hannah and her Sisters*, which he took her to see and now he confesses that 'I was lying. I didn't get it. It wasn't funny' (p. 69). In her drunken state, Teresa asks Frank to promise that he would tell her if her were having an affair and he jokingly replies: 'I thought that was the whole point of having an affair. You don't tell' (p. 70). For this response, Teresa thumps him and in that moment there is a sense of honesty about their relationship and an indication that it might have a future. Frank uses the example of Teresa's parents who were not happy running a hardware store together to reflect on their own future. He asks why they should go on running a business which he for one hates. He breaks the news to her that he wants to run a pub, which, given her reaction to alcohol, is somewhat ironic.

During Teresa's drinking episode, Frank tries to make excuses for her but eventually his sarcasm gets the better of him and he suggests she should have waited until the funeral when she could have had a bigger audience. At one point, Frank actually sides with Mike and turns on his wife saying, 'D'you know something, Teresa, you're not just embarrassing, you're really quite repulsive, when you're drunk. I'm going to give Mike some friendly advice: don't leave your wife. You don't want to marry into this lot. It's worse than the Borgias' (p. 66). Teresa's view of Frank is that he has a 'repertoire of silences' and that his 'silences are the most eloquent thing' about him, which probably says something about the way he is with her when they are alone. Teresa likes to talk and Frank finds it easier to stay quiet or switch off rather than get into an argument.

Frank has an awkward scene with Catherine when she

tries to cuddle up to him and his concept of family precludes stepping over the line by kissing one of his sisters-in-law. This could be another reason for his dislike of *Hannah and her Sisters* which explores infidelity between the sisters and one of the husbands. His idea of good advice to Catherine is blunt and to the point when he suggests that she should just tell 'Pepe to eff off'.

According to Teresa in her more sober frame of mind Frank is just the right man for her and she chose him for his compatibility. The irony is, as Catherine points out, that having gone through a selection process, Teresa has ended up marrying someone who is very like her own father and even Teresa realises this ('You're just like –', p. 68). However, there are no signs that Frank is a philanderer and he seems to have a good sense of humour, even if Teresa doesn't find him witty.

There is something symbolic about the way in which Frank brings in both a bottle of Rescue Remedy and a bottle of vodka to soothe Mary's nerves. In many ways Frank and Teresa are made for each other and their compatibility might well lie in the fact that the former can serve the alcohol and the latter prescribe alternative medicine. It is Frank who fills the awkward silence while waiting for the hearse to arrive by starting an inane conversation about what material the coffin is made from. He may be silent sometimes in Teresa's company but he obviously has the makings of a pub landlord in being able to talk about anything. At the end of the play, Frank the pragmatist comes to the fore as he takes charge of manoeuvring the coffin out of the room and leading everyone off to the funeral.

The play's reception

Theatre critics can influence the reception of a play but word-of-mouth endorsement from members of an audience can equally be a significant factor in contributing to a play's success. Whatever the reservations may have been in some of the original reviews of *The Memory of Water*, both critics

and audience alike had an enjoyable evening in the theatre and found something to laugh at. The original production at London's small Hampstead Theatre announced the arrival on the scene of a playwright who had a way of mixing the serious and the comic and a sure sense of dramatic structure. Benedict Nightingale (*The Times*, 18 July 1996) wrote that:

Stephenson is a vastly talented comic dramatist and has written one of the funnier plays I have seen this year. However, both she and it are suffering from a severe case of teething troubles. For one thing, Stephenson has not yet learnt to control that most slippery of genres, tragi-comedy. For another, she packs far too much material, funny and serious and funny-serious, into two and a half hours.

It is important to remember that *The Memory of Water* is Stephenson's first stage work and that she learnt her craft through the writing and production of a succession of plays for radio. In radio drama, much has to be left to the imagination and everything is communicated through the dialogue, which might account for her ability to write lines and deploy turns of phrase which are immediately arresting to the ear. Stephenson had just turned forty when *The Memory of Water* was produced, hence the maturity apparent in the gamut of emotions the characters go through and the assuredness of the stagecraft. While Stephenson says that her acting career had nothing to do with her work as a playwright, her experience of working in the theatre and connecting with plays must have helped provide her with some of the wherewithal to know how to pace and structure the drama and judge how an audience might respond to a scene. Nightingale may have felt at the time that there was too much to take in on first viewing, but one of the play's strengths is the balance between the elements of seriousness and comedy. Indeed it was his only negative comment about the play which, judging from the following, he could not help enjoying.

It would be nice to report that Stephenson and Haydn Gwynne, the strong, sensitive actress playing Mary, manage to

assimilate the pain she feels into a consistent, credible plot; but they cannot and do not. At worst, *The Memory of Water* flings up feelings and ideas as randomly as a baggage-vomitory at Heathrow. But the play is seldom at its worst and reassuringly often at its best. Not many dramatists have as sharp an eye for the quirks of character as Stephenson, and still fewer are so adroit when it comes to turning comic dialogue.

One of the features of Hampstead Theatre's work is that it is a producing house for new writing and takes risks in providing an emerging writer like Shelagh Stephenson with an opportunity to have a play premiered and gain public recognition for their work. Many new plays and new writers have come to the notice of the press and the public through their premieres at Hampstead but *The Memory of Water* is quite a rarity in bringing its creator such instant recognition and success. Literary agents from Germany were having bidding wars to buy the rights for the play and it was very quickly optioned for an American production. The play's real success came in 1998 when it was picked up by a commercial producer and restaged with a stellar cast. After a short tour of the provinces, the production reached London's West End in January 1999 and found a larger critical reception and wider audience.

Benedict Nightingale's review of the new production, entitled 'A Hard Sister Act to Follow', begins where his earlier one left off, writing about Frank's character. He reasserts his view that Stephenson is 'a dramatist with a sharp eye and a gift for quirky dialogue to match' but remains less certain about her writing when it comes to the more serious elements of the play. In this review, Nightingale puts Stephenson in the company of the prestigious writers Joe Orton, Alan Bennett and Alan Ayckbourn which, for a relatively unknown playwright at the time, was quite an accolade. Nightingale poses some valid questions about the treatment of the theme and the characters and the complexity of the genre but these do not detract from the overall impression that he gained immense pleasure from watching the production.

But tragi-comedy, especially tragi-comedy with intellectual pretensions, is a challenging genre; and you become increasingly aware that, while Teresa, Catherine and Frank exist primarily to provoke laughter, you are meant to care about the second sister, Samantha Bond's cool, incisive Mary. She is the family high-flyer, a thirty-nine-year-old doctor with a married lover, a longing for a child and an agonising secret in her past. She also has some emotionally loaded scenes with Margot Leicester as the ghost of the mother who loved and resented her.

It's weighty stuff, and so, in a different way, is Stephenson's theme, which is the nature, the importance and the self-serving subjectivity of memory. But isn't there something self-conscious about her mentions of Alzheimer's disease and homeopathic theory and her attempts to relate them to sisterly arguments about Mum and the past? Similarly, isn't there something troubling about a play which treats family politics with great intelligence, yet takes one of its victims more seriously than the others? Yes; but take comfort. You will probably be laughing too much at Stephenson's inventive dialogue and Terry Johnson's pacy production to worry. (*The Times*, 13 January 1999)

Michael Coveney in the *Daily Mail* (12 January 1999) describes *The Memory of Water* as a 'wonderful, funny and deeply-felt play' and this sets the tone for what is an enthusiastic review of both the performance and the play. The final sentence neatly crystallises the impression the production left on that first-night audience: 'The play has elements of superior sitcom but also a pleasing theatricality as the cold gathers, the jokes get darker with the night, and Mum's denuded wire coathangers tinkle in the empty wardrobe.' Much of what is written about theatre performances is a matter of personal opinion and taste. What one individual admires, another may dislike and theatrical criticism is often quite subjective. Nicholas de Jongh writing in the London *Evening Standard* (12 January 1999) was the only really dissenting voice about the play at the time because he found that 'the constant air of bitter backbiting irritates rather than illuminates'.

Even the rising up of a fairly fresh corpse fails to breathe enough dramatic life into Shelagh Stephenson's dark comedy about three grownup daughters come home for their mother's funeral. For in some pre-crematory hours of malt whisky drunk, cannabis smoked and rude home truths exchanged, Stephenson dumps a hearse-load of black comedy, flecked with laughs, in front of us. Only the finale generates a poignant, thoughtful stir.

De Jongh is full of praise, however, for Terry Johnson's 'sensitive and delicate production, which ensures the comic cut and thrust is never over-pitched' and for the performances of the leading ladies.

Similarly Michael Billington (*Guardian*, 13 January 1999) admires the three central performances and he also recognises that the play is:

a deeply felt, richly funny study of the pervasive power of the past . . . Stephenson's theme is a very Pinterish one: the notion that we both reinvent the past and are haunted by it. This becomes overliteral in the manifestation of the dead mum. But it also leads to hilarious exchanges between Teresa and her husband that reveal their marriage to be founded on a lie: he hates both health food and Woody Allen films, especially *Hannah and her Sisters*, which brought them together. I suspect Allen is an influence on Stephenson; like him, she breeds laughter out of domestic pain. It's a gift shared by director Terry Johnson, who controls the oscillating moods with skill. [...] It's a measure of the play's success that when Teresa's hubby warns Mary's lover not to marry into 'this lot', you see his point; yet at the same time you recognise the power of Stephenson's argument that we are all the prisoners of our parental past.

Where de Jongh thinks that Sue Plummer's set design was cheap and 'thinly sets the northern, wintry, seaside mood', Susannah Clapp writing in the *Observer* (17 January 1999) says that the plot is 'helped by Sue Plummer's clever design [because] it projects a lively picture of women who are precarious and defiant'. Clapp's prediction that '*The Memory of Water* holds the promise of popularity' was an accurate and astute observation and she makes the point in

comparing the Hampstead production to the West End production that what ‘was predominantly wistful and lyrical . . . is given a great deal of comic bounce’. At the heart of Clapp’s review is her summary of the three central performances of the three sisters:

Samantha Bond, with her crisp carriage and her rustling Judi Dench voice, is poised and subtle as the clever girl with a secret. Julia Sawalha is touching and maddening as the messy, greedy youngest daughter. And Alison Steadman is on exhilarating form as the apparently sensible eldest sister, who unleashes her hidden anger and insight in a magnificent drunken riff, her mouth wobbling around its furious words.

The most detailed and most considered review of the play, written by Robert Butler, appeared in the *Independent on Sunday* (17 January 1999). It is worth looking at the review in full because it compares both the original and second productions and puts forward the argument that, in the revival, the seemingly disparate elements of tragedy and comedy that Benedict Nightingale was so uncertain about have been reconciled.

There must have been a moment when Alison Steadman was reading the script of *The Memory of Water* and had a couple of thoughts. One was, I have to do this. The other was, I know just what I’m going to do with it. My guess would be that these thoughts struck her round about the point in the second act when her character, Teresa, gets a bottle of whisky in her hands. From that moment, as we see from her performance, Steadman grabs hold of Shelagh Stephenson’s play with the same single-mindedness as her character grabs hold of the Johnnie Walker Black Label.

It’s pure West End acting, because we know we’re watching two things. There’s Teresa, on bottom form, and unable to control herself, and there’s Alison Steadman, on top form, and absolutely in charge. Once you’ve witnessed the hilarious sight of Steadman’s Teresa, staggering round her late mother’s bedroom, sloshing whisky into a tumbler and dishing out family truths, you realise that no party could ever be complete without her unnerving presence. They should book her into the Dome for New Year’s Eve.

You don’t often get the chance to see a full change of cast in

a new play unless that play happens to be *Closer* or *Art*. Shelagh Stephenson's first play is the exception. It was premiered at Hampstead two years ago, when the three sisters were well played by Haydn Gwynne, Jane Booker and Matilda Ziegler. The sisters are returning to a cliff-top bungalow on the north-east coast of England the day before their mother's funeral. The resentments and antagonisms towards each other are counterpointed by their anger and disappointment over their relationship with their mum. None of them are like her (or are like each other) and yet none of them has escaped her influence. The first production of *The Memory of Water* was only semi-successful. In that small theatre at Hampstead two plays, a funny one and a sad one, kept bumping up against each other and fighting for air.

Terry Johnson directed the Hampstead production and he now directs the West End one. He has clearly discovered something pretty major along the way. It's close to a scientific discovery, in fact. Terry Johnson's Law (as I understand it) is that you get a new cast to give the old characters an extra size, and when they turn up the performances and raise the temperature, a chemical reaction occurs. In the second production of Shelagh Stephenson's play the funny bits and the sad bits coexist quite happily.

Johnson is helped by his casting, which distinguishes more precisely between the humour and the hurt. You can divide the cast into two. Samantha Bond plays Mary, the doctor who's having a long affair with a man who won't leave his wife. This is a straight role and Bond, for all her snappy one-liners, plays it straight. Steadman's long-suffering husband who thinks the herbal remedies that he and his wife sell are rubbish, is played successfully by Mark Lambert as a comic role, while Samantha Bond's boyfriend, the quiet TV doctor who won't commit, is equally successfully played by Patrick Drury as a straight role. As the younger sister, Catherine, Julia Sawalha dives headlong into the comedy zone. She's the hypochondriac and shopaholic in the family ('broke doesn't mean you can't buy anything'), who crouches by the phone, willing her ex-boyfriend to ring. The vigorous bickering is always fresh, with Steadman, who has looked after their sick mother, telling the others: 'If it was left up to you two, she would have to cremate herself.'

An acute and funny writer, Stephenson carves out a

welcome territory that is distinctive, contemporary and theatrical, viz the spectral appearances of the mother, Vi (Margot Leicester), in party frock. Stephenson brings a sharp humour to the sentimentality surrounding death. Does anyone, for instance, want to keep their mother's breast pump? Perhaps because it's her first play, Stephenson packs in a few too many one-liners which makes the dialogue at times a bit stilted. It also runs a little long, so that the fizz that Steadman creates in the middle of the second act has gone by the end. But worth seeing for that fizz alone.

In retrospect it is not difficult to see from this kind of critical reception why Shelagh Stephenson was catapulted into the limelight and received the Olivier Award for Best Comedy in 2000. It is also important to remember that audiences loved the play and the production and it has gone on to become one of the most popular plays for amateur theatre groups across the world. However, it is not an easy play to pull off successfully in performance and Stephenson has reported how American actors tend to play it operatically because they do not appreciate that the behaviour of the characters is real. The play was revived in 2005 at Watford Palace Theatre directed by Joyce Branagh in a production which Dominic Cavendish in the *Daily Telegraph* (29 September 2005) described as 'underwhelming'. The tenor of Cavendish's review was that too much emphasis was placed on the obsessions of the daughters rather than on the mother whose funeral they are attending. This may be to miss the point of the play, but it is an interesting point of view, looking at it more from Vi's perspective and her generation than from her daughters' angle.

There's a speech halfway through *The Memory of Water* that lingers longer in the mind than anything else in Shelagh Stephenson's much admired, much revived play [. . .] The one thing that her daughters lack, Vi tells broody, thirty-nine-year-old Mary, is humility. 'You drink champagne because you feel like it, you buy things with plastic cards. I've wanted that . . . And you carry it so lightly, you're not even grateful.' As an articulation of the incredulous hurt with which those people who grew up knowing real hardship during the war and its aftermath must regard the have-it-all, couldn't-care-less

generations that have come in their wake, it's fantastic, knock-'em-dead stuff. The great twist, though, is that Vi is dead; she appears to Mary in a green taffeta frock from the '50s, amid the mayhem of funeral preparations at her home. She's a fleeting figment of her daughter's guilty imagination, so the speech is lifted beyond simple envy and anger and poignantly emphasises the unbridgeable divide between parent and offspring, and the brutal fact that we continue to talk to people after they've gone about things that were never said at the time.

It's one of the few times when the play makes you feel a genuine stab of sympathy for someone, and it leaves you wishing that you heard a bit more from Vi and rather less from her daughters, who, at least, in Joyce Branagh's underwhelming revival at Watford Palace Theatre, ooze unlovely self-absorption. While that's a vital part of Stephenson's brassy comic approach to mourning – the women bickering about who did what, when, and fretting over their various personal relationship crises – there needs to be a compensating factor of likeability. And in this cast, only Jacquetta May – careworn and withdrawn as Mary – shows a glimmer of that.

The play received its Northern Ireland premiere at the Lyric Theatre, Belfast, in 2003, directed by Paula McFettridge and its Scottish premiere at the Tron Theatre, Glasgow, in 2004, directed by Muriel Romanes. Both of these productions proved to be crowd-pullers and demonstrated that the play's characters and themes speak equally strongly to audiences outside London. Tom Sweeney of the *Mirror* newspaper (20 March 2003) in a feature entitled 'Howling Audience Laps Up Water' reported that, even though the press night followed the St Patrick's Day celebrations, 'the opening night audience couldn't get enough of writer Shelagh Stephenson's Olivier Award Best Comedy 2000 winner and howled, which was appropriate considering the full moon illuminating the Lagan outside.' Praising the performances of the mostly Irish cast, he goes on to say that 'they present a powerhouse performance that proves funerals can be fun; that often beneath the black mood of bereavement lies a bundle of

laughs bursting to get out. Don't be put off by anyone who insists this is a play solely for women. Last time I looked I was a man, but I loved it.'

You could be forgiven for thinking that Robin Dawson Scott's review of the Scottish production in *The Times* (17 May 2004) is less than complimentary, when in fact he is being congratulatory about the way in which the visual angularity of the set design and the way the detritus created by the characters is skilfully stage-managed to reflect both the actual and metaphorical chaos contained within the fabric of the play.

It's a mess, this production. The furniture is all at drunken angles, the walls are cracking, there are half-empty boxes, stuffed binliners, old clothes all over the place. Then there are the characters – the three sisters, their men and their mother – all of them a mess, too, in their own ways. And that is exactly how it should be because this is a play, at the risk of sounding like the kind of *Reader's Digest* epigram quoted by one of the sisters, about the messiness of life, how it just refuses to be neat and tidy, how it is always running off at the edges. One of the many impressive features of this show, a co-production between Stellar Quines, the Tron and the Byre Theatre, is how artfully the chaos is created. The set-piece towards the end of the first act where the three sisters, gathered together for their mother's funeral, start rooting through her old wardrobe trying on half-forgotten outfits, is a gem of theatrical precision, with pace, conviction and apparent abandon.

Altogether, this is a master-class on how to make popular theatre. First choose your play. Shelagh Stephenson's debut piece has already been a great success around the world but that is no reason for not doing it for the first time in Scotland. Then cast it with first-rate actors at the top of their game; Alexandra Mathie, Jennifer Black and Molly Innes as the sisters, Simon Coury and Crawford Logan as the men, and Mary Keegan as their mother (no reason why being dead should prevent you having a decent role in a play) are all first rate.

Next, get Isla Shaw to produce a quirky (all those funny angles) but essentially simple set, choose your props cleverly and have Natasha Chivers light it with real flair. Finally direct it, as Muriel Romanes, top quine of Stellar Quines, does, with

the attention to detail I have already mentioned, but also with a clear belief that a play which could be dismissed as bourgeois or sentimental is worth every word.

There is nothing new in plays about families, not even families gathering at the funeral of a loved one. But the central metaphor in the slightly clunky title, that water retains some biochemical memory of whatever has been dissolved in it, however dilute, is a good one. Families are both blessed and cursed by the generations before them and will bless and curse the ones that come after. This play and production bring the idea to life in a way which is recognisably human; and that's what wins it its warm applause.

The film version – *Before You Go*

Sheila Stephenson was persuaded by the veteran film director Lewis Gilbert to adapt *The Memory of Water* for the screen. Lewis Gilbert was eighty-one when he directed it and, following in the wake of three James Bond movies, the 1966 adaptation of Bill Naughton's *Alfie* and the success of his film versions of Willy Russell's *Educating Rita* and *Shirley Valentine*, it was his thirty-eighth feature film. What interested Gilbert was the fact that *The Memory of Water* was a comedy and the film loses much of the darker edge of the play because of it. The subtlety of the play's title and its significance is completely lost in the film as is immediately evident in the change of title to *Before You Go*. In the film Mary says of Vi, 'she runs through all of us like wine through water whether we like it or not', and this is a much more simplistic description of the way the memory of their mother is like a trace element in each of the three sisters.

The film version had a less than favourable critical reception and the consensus of opinion seems to be that in opening the play out, much of the wit and focus of the family drama in the original was lost. According to the Film4 critic, 'Not even the comic talents of Julie Walters can save this film from being another dead-ended Brit flick which fails to transfer the magic from stage to screen.' The fact that the location of the film has been moved to the Isle

of Man in the summer lends a very different atmosphere to that of the play which is set in the dead of winter on the North Yorkshire coast. Neil Smith (*Total Film* magazine, August 2002) remarks that ‘where *Before You Go* really falters is in its clumsy attempts to “open out” the play by propelling the action out of the house at every conceivable opportunity. Clearly Gilbert hoped to make this essentially theatrical potboiler cinematic. But after the umpteenth shot of sandy beach or dramatic cliff-top, you wonder if he wasn’t under orders to include as much Isle of Man scenery as possible – especially as its Film Commission invested heavily in the production.’

The film starts with a close-up of Vi’s aged and dead face and the opening credits appear over a flashback of the three girls when they were children playing on the beach. This sequence ends with a white sheet being pulled over Vi’s face and it is apparent that she has just died in hospital. The first scene is set in the hospital and is an enacted version of the speech Teresa makes in the play about the doctor telling her and Frank that their mother was ‘more or less dead’ (p. 17) opened out to become a dialogue between Frank, Teresa and the young doctor. Teresa is seen wearing odd shoes and bursting out into hysterical laughter. These are the kind of changes and additions that have been made in order to tell the story in more than one location. The play is essentially a one-room drama but the film extends to locations such as an airport, a public house, the central shopping street of Douglas in the Isle of Man and a graveyard for the final burial scene.

Where the theatre version leaves a lot to the audience’s imagination, the film represents things in a far more literal way. The film is structurally and stylistically different to the stage version, especially in its treatment of Mary’s vision of Vi and in the way the comedy is played. The opening dream sequence of the play is ‘translated’ into a short dialogue sequence between Mary and Mike at work in the hospital when she tells Mike about how she keeps dreaming about her mother when she was younger. The first encounter with the younger Vi (played by Patricia Hodge) is

when Mary arrives by taxi at the large white house on the hill and surveys the garden. The scene fades to a sequence filmed in sepia to make the obvious point that it is going back in time. Mary imagines seeing her mother gardening and watches herself as a fourteen-year-old schoolgirl telling Vi that she is pregnant. Vi slaps the younger Mary across the face. This scene is repeated later on and the third time it is seen it is extended by showing the next moment after the slap, where mother and daughter hug each other and weep together. It is not entirely clear whether this is what actually happened or whether it is what Mary wished had happened. There is an awkward scene in the living room when Mary reaches out to Vi and just as their hands are about to touch, the 'ghost' disappears like something out of a Walt Disney fantasy picture.

Where the scenes with Vi in the play have a sense of 'otherness', the clumsy treatment of them in the film throws the story off balance. The significant dialogue that Vi has in Act Two, Scene Three, where she describes what it felt like to have Alzheimer's,

Like I had holes in my brain. Frightening. Huge rips. I'd not recognise people. You just think, where am I? What's going on? And then you don't know what you mean when you say 'I'. It doesn't seem to mean anything' (p. 85)

has been cut entirely from the film because its tone was probably felt to be far too serious for the lighter touch Lewis Gilbert wanted to give the film.

One of the oddest structural differences is the way in which Teresa's scene in Act Two, when she gets progressively drunk and starts to speak a few home truths, is chopped about and moved around different locations. The scene starts in the house, moves out into the street and finishes in a pub before an audience of drinkers. Frank drags Teresa out of the pub and apologises to the landlord for her behaviour. In the theatre the scene works because the audience can empathise with Teresa's behaviour and it is contained within the family circle. In opening the scene out into a more public arena and showing the reaction of

unrelated people in the pub, the scene becomes more about someone embarrassing their family in front of other people and the empathy shifts from Teresa to Frank and the others.

The other departure from the play is the creation of an undertaker character and a comedy priest, giveaway signs that Lewis Gilbert was more interested in the broader comic strokes of the play than any kind of subtlety. Father Cunningham, as he is called (played by Dermot Crowley who was Frank in the first Hampstead production), arrives at the house in a flustered state with a carrier bag. He says he has come to see their mother, to which Mary replies that she is 'in the mortuary'. The priest conducts a prayer meeting with the three sisters in the living room and gives a blessing for their dead mother but gets her name wrong. He apologises for the mistake citing the fact that he has had four bereavements in a week to deal with. Mr Berry, the undertaker (played by Hugh Ross), appears in an early scene with Frank and Teresa when they are choosing Vi's coffin. In the polite manner that undertakers have, he shows them the different models of coffin and is obviously disappointed that they want 'something plain' and 'nothing too fancy' at the cheaper end of the range. He recommends 'the Arts and Crafts for your late mother'. The undertaker appears again when the coffin is taken out of the house and put into the hearse. The hearse overheats and breaks down and Vi is made late for her own funeral. This episode turns into a complete farce and has echoes of the film version of Joe Orton's *Loot* when the hearse arrives at the cemetery being towed by an ice-cream van playing the typical 'stop-me-and-buy-one' type music. Catherine's one line, 'Poor Mum. Even her funeral's a cock-up' (p. 90), has been expanded into a scene that, while being amusing, has a completely different style and tone about it.

It would be a mistake to view the film *Before You Go* as any kind of faithful document of the stage play. The central idea of the play about three sisters meeting at their mother's funeral and settling old scores is there but it becomes more about women behaving badly than a believable exploration of three daughters finding ways of coping with their

mother's death. It is as though the film-makers have set out to make *Four Weddings and a Funeral* without the weddings. For anyone not familiar with the stage play, the film works effectively enough and is never let down by the performances or the scenery. Debbie Wiseman's tuneful music wafts around in the background and plays its part in underscoring the changes of emotion and mood in the drama. But everything about the film is obvious and heavy-handed and while it might have done much for the Isle of Man tourist board, it does little to enhance the reputation of Shelagh Stephenson's original play.

This review from *Total Film* (August 2002) sums up the general disappointment that was felt at the time about the film, particularly because of Lewis Gilbert's pedigree as a director.

You would have thought the director of *Educating Rita* and *Shirley Valentine* would be on safe ground adapting a play for the screen. But Lewis Gilbert's best days are behind him judging by this mawkish mishmash – a family comedy spliced, unwisely, with supernatural melodrama. The octogenarian helmer's attempts to open out Shelagh Stephenson's original are conspicuously laboured, the dialogue scenes forced apart by clumsily inserted scenic vistas of the Isle of Man (its Film Commission being one of the main investors). It's no fault of Julie Walters, Joanne Whalley and Victoria Hamilton, who deliver heartfelt performances as estranged sisters reunited by their mum's funeral. But the intrusive score crudely signposts every plot twist, tearful revelation and ghostly visitation from the late Violet.

Further Reading

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- Dromgoole, Dominic, *The Full Room: An A-Z of Contemporary Playwriting*, Methuen Drama, 2002
- Milgrom, Lionel, 'Icy Claim That Water Has Memory', *New Scientist*, 11 June 2003
- Stephenson, Shelagh, *Plays: 1* (contains an introduction by the author, *The Memory of Water, Five Kinds of Silence, An Experiment with an Air Pump* and *Ancient Lights*) Methuen Drama, 2003
- Stephenson, Shelagh, *Enlightenment*, Methuen Drama, 2005
- Stephenson, Shelagh, *Mappa Mundi*, Methuen Drama, 2002

Website

www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/profile

DVD

Before You Go (film version of *The Memory of Water*), directed by Lewis Gilbert, Entertainment in Video, EDV9180

The Memory of Water

For Eoin O'Callaghan, with love

The Memory of Water was first performed at the Hampstead Theatre, London, on 11 July 1996, with the following cast:

Mary	Haydn Gwynne
Vi	Mary Jo Randle
Teresa	Jane Booker
Catherine	Matilda Ziegler
Mike	Alexander Hanson
Frank	Dermot Crowley

Directed by Terry Johnson

Designed by Sue Plummer

Lighting by Robert Bryan

Sound by John A. Leonard

Act One

*Blackness. A pool of bluish-green light reveals **Vi**, aged around forty. She is sitting at a dressing-table. The drawer is open. She wears a green taffeta cocktail frock circa 1962. She is sexy, immaculately made up, her hair perfectly coiffed. She wears earrings and a matching necklace, and carries a clutch bag, from which she takes a cigarette and lighter. She lights up. The pool of light opens up to reveal the rest of the room in a dim, golden, unreal glow: a bedroom, dominated by a double bed in which **Mary** lies, wearing a pair of sunglasses. She watches **Vi**. The room is slightly old-fashioned, with dressing-table and matching wardrobe. Some clothes are draped over a chair. There is a long diagonal crack running across the wall behind the bed. An open suitcase lies on the floor, half unpacked, a half-full bottle of whisky and a pile of books on the bedside table.*

Mary What do you want?

Vi Someone's been going through these drawers.

Mary Not me.

Vi What did you think you'd find?

Mary Nothing.

Vi *closes the drawer and looks over to the bed.*

Vi That crack's getting worse. Have you noticed anything about the view?

Mary No.

Vi It's closer.

Mary What is?

Vi The sea. Fifty yards closer. It'll take the house eventually. All gone without a trace. Nothing left. And all the life that happened here, drowned, sunk. As if it had never been.

Mary D'you remember a green tin box with chrysanthemums on it?

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Vi No.

Mary It had papers in it. It's gone. Where is it?

Vi I've no idea.

Mary What have you done with it?

Vi *picks up some books from the bedside table and looks through the titles.*

Vi *Head Injuries and Short-Term Changes in Neural Behaviour . . .
The Phenomenology of Memory . . . Peripheral Signalling of the Brain.*

She puts them down.

Bloody hell, Mary. What's wrong with Georgette Heyer?

Go to black. Fade up bedside lamp. Vi has gone. Mary is lying prostrate. She stirs and gets out of bed, goes to the dressing-table, opens drawers, rifles through them. The phone rings.

Mary Hello? . . . What time is it? . . . I wouldn't be talking to you if I was, would I? I'd be unconscious . . . Where are you? . . . Jesus . . . you're what? So will you want me to pick you up from the station?

The door opens and Teresa comes in.

Teresa Oh . . .

Mary Hold on . . . (*To Teresa.*) It's not for you.

Teresa Who is it?

Mary (*to caller*) What? She's gone where? . . . OK, OK. I'll see you later. Are you sure you don't want me to pick you up –

She's cut off.

Hello? . . . Shit.

Teresa Who was that?

Mary A nuisance caller. We struck up a rapport.

Teresa He's not staying here, is he?

Mary Who?

Teresa I'm presuming it's your boyfriend.

Mary How much sleep have I had?

She picks up a portable alarm clock and peers at it.

Teresa How's his wife?

Mary Jesus. Two and a half hours.

She flops back on the pillows. Looks at Teresa.

Why are you looking so awake?

Teresa I've been up since quarter past five. Presumably he's leaving her at home, then.

Mary You've got that slight edge in your voice. Like a blunt saw.

Teresa I'm just asking –

Mary Of course he's bloody leaving her at home. She's gone to stay with her mother.

Teresa I thought she was ill.

Mary Maybe she went in an iron lung. Maybe she made a miracle recovery. I don't know. I didn't ask.

Teresa Where's he going to sleep?

Mary What?

Teresa You can't sleep with him in that bed.

Mary He's staying in a hotel.

Teresa I thought it might be something important.

Mary What?

Teresa The phone. Funeral directors or something.

Mary We've done all that. Can I go back to sleep?

Teresa And where's Catherine?

Mary She said she might stay over with someone.

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Teresa Does she still have friends here?

Mary Probably. I don't know.

She turns away, settles down, and shuts her eyes. Teresa watches her for a while.

Teresa She could have phoned to say. Anything could have happened to her. It's still snowing.

Mary She's thirty-three, Teresa.

Teresa The roads are terrible.

Mary She'll get a taxi.

Teresa Probably just as well she didn't come home. She'd have probably drunk four bottles of cider and been brought home in a police car. And then she'd have been sick all over the television.

Mary She was thirteen when she did that.

Teresa She was lucky she didn't get electrocuted.

Mary It wasn't switched on.

Teresa Yes it was, I was watching it. It was *The High Chaparral*.

Mary No it wasn't. I wish you'd stop remembering things that didn't actually happen.

Teresa I was there. You weren't.

Mary *gives up trying to sleep. Sits up.*

Mary I was there.

Teresa That was the other time. The time when she ate the cannabis.

Mary That was me. I ate hash cookies.

Teresa It was Catherine.

Mary It was me.

Teresa I was there.

Mary So where was I?

Teresa Doing your homework probably. Dissecting frogs. Skinning live rabbits. Strangling cats. The usual.

Mary Teresa. I'd like to get another hour's sleep. I'm not in the mood, OK?

She tries to settle down in the bed, and pulls something out that's causing her discomfort: a glass contraption with a rubber bulb at one end. She puts it on the bedside table and settles down again. Teresa picks it up.

Teresa Oh, for God's sake . . . Is this what I think it is?

Mary I don't know. What d'you think it is?

Teresa A breast pump.

Mary I found it on top of the wardrobe. I think I'd like to have it.

Teresa Why?

Mary Because you've got the watch and the engagement ring.

Teresa For Lucy. Not for me. For Lucy.

Mary OK. So you want the breast pump. Have it.

Teresa I don't want it.

Mary Good. That's settled. Now let me go to sleep.

Teresa You can't just take things willy-nilly.

Mary You did.

Teresa Oh, I see. I see what this is about.

Mary *sits up.*

Mary It's not about anything, it's about me trying to get some sleep. For Christ's sake, Teresa, it's too early in the morning for this.

Mary *pulls the covers over her head. Silence. Teresa goes to the door, turns back.*

Teresa Could you keep off the phone, I'm waiting for Frank to ring and my mobile's recharging –

Mary If you take that phone to the funeral this time –

Teresa Oh, go to sleep.

Mary *sits up.*

Mary I'm surprised Dad didn't burst out of his coffin and punch you.

Teresa I didn't know it was in my bag.

Mary You could have turned it off. You didn't have to speak to them.

Teresa I didn't speak to them.

Mary You did. I heard you. You told them you were in a meeting.

Teresa You're imagining this. This is a completely false memory.

Mary All memories are false.

Teresa Mine aren't.

Mary Yours in particular.

Teresa Oh, I see, mine are all false but yours aren't.

Mary That's not what I said.

Teresa And what's with the Ray-Bans?

Mary *takes them off.*

Mary I couldn't sleep with the light on.

Teresa You could have turned it off.

Mary I was frightened of the dark.

Teresa When did this start?

Mary It's all right for you. You're not sleeping in her bed.

Teresa Oh, for goodness' sake.

Mary You grabbed the spare room pretty sharpish.

Teresa I was here first.

Mary Have the sheets been changed?

Teresa Yes.

Mary When?

Teresa What difference does it make?

Mary I don't like sleeping in her bed, that's all.

Teresa She didn't die in it.

Mary She was the last person in it. It's full of bits of skin and hair that belong to her –

Teresa Stop it –

Mary And it makes me feel uncomfortable –

Teresa What bits of skin and hair?

Mary You shed cells. They fall off when you're asleep. I found a toenail before.

Teresa Please.

Mary I thought I might keep it in a locket round my neck. Or maybe you'd like it –

Teresa Stop it, for goodness' sake.

She picks up a book from the bedside table.

You can't leave work alone for five minutes, can you, even at a time like this?

Mary I've a very sick patient.

Teresa You had a very sick mother.

Mary Don't start, Teresa.

Teresa Oh, she never complained. Because your job's important. I mean, doctors are second to God, whereas Frank and I only have a business to run, so obviously we could drop everything at a moment's notice.

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Mary It's not my fault.

Silence.

Teresa Why do we always do this?

Mary What?

Teresa Why do we always argue?

Mary We don't argue, we bicker.

Teresa OK, why do we bicker?

Mary Because we don't get on.

Teresa Yes we do.

Mary Oh, have it your own way.

She unscrews the whisky and takes a swig. Teresa looks at her, aghast.

Teresa You haven't even got out of bed yet.

Mary It's the only way we're going to get through this.

She offers it to Teresa, who shakes her head.

Teresa D'you often have a drink in the morning?

Mary Of course I bloody don't, what d'you think I am?

Teresa Lots of doctors are alcoholics. It's the stress.

Mary Someone dies, you drink whisky. It's normal, it's a sedative, it's what normal people do at abnormal times.

She takes another swig. Silence.

OK. Let's be nice to each other.

Silence.

What do people usually talk about when their mother's just died?

Teresa I don't know. Funeral arrangements. What colour coffin. I've got a list somewhere.

Mary There should be a set form. Like those books on

wedding etiquette. Sudden Death Etiquette. Lesson One. Breaking the news. Phrases to avoid include: guess what?

Teresa I was distraught, I wasn't thinking properly –

Mary I thought you'd won the lottery or something –

Teresa It's quite tricky for you, being nice, isn't it?

Mary Sorry. I forgot. How are you feeling?

Teresa *looks at her watch.*

Teresa I was expecting him to phone an hour ago.

Mary I'm not talking about Frank.

Teresa I don't know how I feel. Everything I eat tastes of salt.

*Silence. She crosses the room and takes the whisky from **Mary**. She takes a swig and grimaces.*

Salt. Everything tastes of it.

Hands it back. Sits on the bed.

The funeral director's got a plastic hand.

Mary God.

Pause.

What's it like?

Teresa Pink.

Mary What happened to his real one?

Teresa How should I know?

Mary Didn't you ask him?

Teresa It didn't seem appropriate.

Mary No. I suppose not.

Teresa He was showing us pictures of coffins.

Mary As they do.

Catherine *(off)* Hi!

Mary Oh God.

Teresa In here.

Catherine *bursts in, wrapped in layers of coats and scarves, laden with carrier bags. She divests herself as she speaks.*

Catherine God, it's bloody freezing out there. It's like *Scott of the Antarctic*, the cab was sliding all over the place and I had one of those drivers who kept saying, have you been shopping, are you going somewhere nice? And I said, yes, actually, a funeral. My mother's. I thought, that'll shut him up, but it turns out he knew her. I forgot what it's like up here. Everyone knows the butcher's daughter's husband's mother's cat. And he got all upset, we had to pull over, so anyway I invited him to the funeral. He's called Dougie. I bet he doesn't come. God, I've got this really weird pain at the very bottom of my stomach, here, look, just above my pubic bone. It keeps going sort of stab, twist, so either I've got some sort of cyst, but actually, God, I know what it is, I bet. I bet I'm ovulating. Isn't that amazing? I can actually feel the egg being released. Although, hang on, I don't think I'm due to ovulate. You can't ovulate twice in the same month, can you? It's not my appendix because I haven't got one. Fuck. It must be PMT. In which case I think I've got an ovarian cyst.

Silence.

Mary D'you want us to take you to hospital or shall I whip it out now on the kitchen table?

Catherine I'll be fine.

Mary Good, because I'm over the limit for either activity.

Catherine Oh brilliant, whisky.

She picks up the bottle and takes a slug.

Teresa Where've you been?

Catherine Shopping.

Teresa Shopping?

Catherine Well, you'd call it a displacement activity, but I call it shopping.

Teresa All night?

Catherine I went for a drink. I stayed with some friends.

Teresa What friends?

Catherine You don't know them. Oh God, there it goes again. Have you ever had this? Right here. Right at the bottom of your stomach?

Teresa No.

Catherine What d'you think it is?

Mary I've no idea.

Teresa We've been worried sick.

Catherine Look, just here –

She takes Mary's hand and holds it against her groin.

Mary Wind.

Catherine Do any of your patients actually survive?

Teresa You could have picked up a phone. I mean, where've you been?

Catherine Down the docks shagging sailors, what d'you think?

Mary I'd have come with you if I'd known.

Teresa It's just a bit insensitive –

Mary Yes it is. There's a time and a place for everything –

Teresa Disappearing, leaving us to deal with all this –

Catherine All what? D'you like my shoes? I can't stop buying shoes. I even like the smell of them. Honestly, it's just like an eating disorder except it's not it's just shoes although sometimes it's underwear. D'you ever get that, you have to

buy twenty pairs of knickers all at once, usually when you're a bit depressed –

Teresa You can't wear those for a funeral. You look like Gary Glitter.

Catherine I didn't buy them for the funeral.

Mary I remember them the first time round. They were horrible then.

Catherine I got them in a sale.

Mary Oh well. That's some consolation.

Catherine What's wrong with them?

Teresa I thought you didn't have any money.

Catherine Credit cards. What's wrong with them?

Teresa You said you were broke.

Catherine Oh, for God's sake, broke doesn't mean you can't buy things. I'm trying to cheer myself up, or is that not allowed? The minute I walk in the door I feel it in waves, the two of you waiting to pounce, looking for something to criticise. Christ, it's no wonder I've got low self-esteem.

Mary You have an ego the size of Asia Minor.

Catherine I'm just asking you to clarify your position *vis-à-vis* my shoes. I mean, quite obviously you don't like them, but why d'you always have to do this sneery superior thing? Why can't you just be straight and say you hate them?

Mary I hate them. Can I go back to sleep now?

Teresa I'm just wondering how you can afford to go out and buy all this stuff if you haven't got any money.

Mary She shoplifts.

Catherine Will someone tell me what I'm supposed to have done?

Mary It was a joke.

Catherine So all right, I know, Mum's dead –

Teresa There's no need to put it like that –

Catherine But you want me to sit down and cry about it and I can't.

Mary I don't. I want you to go away.

Catherine You always do this to me.

Mary I'm tired.

Catherine Some of the things you say to me are just, you know, not on. It's like I don't count. All my bloody life. And I'm not having it any more. I won't take it any more, OK?

Teresa Have you been taking drugs, Catherine?

Catherine Oh, for God's sake. I was in a really good mood till I walked in here.

Teresa Your mother's just died, how can you be in a good mood? Try and be a bit more sensitive –

Catherine No one's being sensitive to me.

Mary We fucking are!

Silence.

Catherine Did Xavier call?

Mary Who?

Catherine Xavier.

Mary I thought he was called Pepe?

Catherine You see, this is what you do to me. This permanent, constant, endless belittling.

Teresa He didn't call.

Catherine I'm about to marry him and you can't even get his name right.

Mary You're always about to marry people.

Catherine What's that supposed to mean?

Mary And you never do.

Teresa Oh shut up, both of you.

Silence.

Catherine If I don't get some painkillers I'm going to die.

Mary There might be some paracetamol in my case.

Catherine Haven't you got anything more exotic?

Catherine *goes to the suitcase.*

Mary Not for you, no. They're in the pocket. Now, will you both go away and let me get some sleep?

Teresa Would anyone like some Barley Cup?

Catherine *finds the paracetamol and takes a couple.*

Catherine I'd rather drink my own urine.

Mary You may laugh.

Teresa I do not drink my own urine.

Mary Yet.

Catherine Haven't we got any ordinary tea?

Teresa That stuff in the kitchen's made from floor sweepings. You might as well drink liquid cancer.

Mary God, you do talk absolute shite sometimes.

Teresa Some people think that drinking your own urine –

Mary Yes I know. And they're all mad.

Teresa You're always so certain when it comes to things you know nothing about.

Mary You know bugger all about bugger all.

Teresa You've a completely closed mind, it infuriates me. You're so supercilious, you don't even listen –

Mary If God had meant you to ingest your own urine, he'd have rigged up a drinking-straw arrangement directly from your bladder. To save you the indignity of squatting over a teacup. Now, please, I just want an hour.

Teresa There are things to do.

Mary They can wait.

Catherine I'm going to have a hot bath and a joint. I can't stand this.

She goes.

Teresa So once again it's me. Everything falls to me.

Mary Go and have a lie-down, Teresa.

Teresa I can't bloody lie down, I can't sit still. I can't cope, I need some Rescue Remedy.

She goes out.

Mary I've got some beta blockers, they're much better –

Teresa (*off*) I get agitated. I get like this. I don't need drugs.

She comes back, carrying her bag, chanting.

Teresa Brown one and a half pounds of shin of beef in a heavy casserole. Remove and set aside. Sauté two medium onions in the casserole with two crushed cloves of garlic –

Mary What are you doing?

Teresa Recipes. I recite recipes. It's very soothing. I've tried meditation but my mind wanders. I think of all the phone calls I should be making instead of sitting there going 'om'. Carbonnade of beef seems to work best.

Mary You're a vegetarian.

Teresa I've tried it with nut loaf but it's not the same. And now I've got that salt taste in my mouth and I feel sick.

Mary Psychosomatic.

Teresa I know it's psychosomatic. I know it is, all right. I'd just like it to stop, that's all.

Catherine *comes in with a bundle of mail.*

Catherine More fan mail.

Mary I thought you'd gone for a bath to soothe your cyst.

Catherine There's not enough water. So it's still sort of niggling, I wish it would stop –

She goes to her carrier bags and takes out various pieces of clothing. She opens the wardrobe door, holds them up against herself in front of the mirror.

I think it's stress. I mean, it's an incredibly stressful time, isn't it, and I always get things like this when I'm strung out. Last year I had this weird thing in my legs, like they were kind of restless or jumpy or something. Every time I tried to go to sleep they used to sort of twitch and hop. The doctor in Spain said it was quite common and I just needed to relax more, but I can't, I've got an incredibly fast metabolism and then I get that spasm thing in my stomach which is definitely stress-related, I'm sure it's irritable bowel syndrome. I mean, that starts up the minute I'm even a tiny bit tense, I notice it straight away because I'm very in touch with my body, I can sort of hear it speaking to me.

Pause.

Teresa I think I'm going mad.

Catherine Last night I dreamed I could do yogic flying. I bet that means something –

She tugs at the jacket.

I'm not sure about this, are you? I don't suit black, that's the problem.

Teresa As soon as the phone went I knew.

Catherine Can you wear trousers at a funeral?

Teresa I said to Frank, I can't answer it. We should never have left her at the hospital like that. We should have stayed.

Mary You weren't to know.

Teresa I'm not good with hospitals, I had to get away. Everyone in her ward looked like they'd already died, everyone was pale grey with a catheter.

Mary *is opening the mail. Reads.*

Mary 'With deepest sympathy on your sad loss, Mimi.' Who's Mimi?

Teresa When Frank spoke to them they said, 'She's worse, you'd better get up to the hospital.' I took the phone and said, 'She's dead, isn't she, you don't phone at three in the morning unless someone's dead.' And then, this is the awful bit, I put the phone down, and the thing I wanted to do more than anything else was have sex, which is sick, I know, that's what Frank said afterwards. I know I should have phoned you two, but I had this idea, this flicker she might not be dead, even though I knew she was really, but they wouldn't tell me over the phone, and I'd have woken you up, and what would the point be anyway, you were miles away –

Mary It's OK. Stop worrying about it –

Teresa That's why I didn't phone straight away. Mimi used to live three doors down.

Catherine Can I borrow a skirt from someone?

Teresa I keep going over and over it –

Catherine Is anyone listening to me?

Mary Oh, shut up and sit down. Your cyst might burst.

Teresa And the doctor was about twelve, and embarrassed. Eventually we had to say it for him. He kept fiddling with his pen and giving us a rundown of everything that had happened, until eventually Frank said, 'Are you trying to tell us she's not coming back? Are you trying to tell us she's dead?' And he said, 'More or less, yes.' And I said, 'What d'you mean, more or less? She's either dead or she isn't, you can't be a bit dead, for God's sake.' And then I looked at my feet and I was wearing odd shoes. A black one and a brown one. Not even vaguely similar. So I started to laugh and I couldn't stop.

They had to give me a sedative. Frank was shocked. They're not like us, his family, they've got Italian blood. Someone dies, they cry. They don't get confused and laugh.

Catherine All I want to know is, can I borrow a skirt?

Mary Oh shut up, Catherine, for Christ's sake!

Catherine If I could get an answer out of anyone, I would –

Mary Yes, you can borrow a fucking skirt!

Silence. Teresa goes to her bag and takes out a bottle of pills. She takes two.

Catherine What are they?

Teresa Nerve tablets. Have one, for heaven's sake. Have six. Have the lot. They're completely organic, no chemicals.

Catherine I like chemicals.

Teresa (*emptying her bag on to the bed*) All right, don't then. I've got a list somewhere. Things to sort out.

Mary Do it later, Teresa.

Teresa I can't. I can't sit still. I have to do it now.

Mary You're a useless advertisement for the health food industry.

Teresa Supplements. We do health supplements. Remedies. How many times do I have to tell you? You do this deliberately, you wilfully misinterpret what we do because you think it's funny or something, and actually I'm getting bored with it.

Catherine You're making me incredibly tense, both of you.

Teresa We're making you tense? Good God, you haven't stopped since you came in. Jumping around all over the place like you're on speed, which, thinking about it, you probably are, blahing on about your ovaries and your restless legs and your PMT. I don't give a toss about your insides. Has anyone seen my electronic organiser?

They look vaguely round the room. Silence.

Mary What does it look like?

Teresa I had it a minute ago, I had it –

Teresa *throws her bag down. Silence.* **Catherine** *offers her the joint.*

Catherine D’you want some of this?

Teresa No, thank you.

Mary Maybe you should.

Catherine It’s completely organic. We grew it in the garden.

Teresa *takes a reluctant puff. Then another. Silence.*

Catherine You know when you went to the hospital. When she was dead.

Teresa Mmmm . . . ?

Catherine Did you see her?

Teresa Who?

Catherine Mum.

Teresa Of course I did.

Catherine How did she look?

Teresa Asleep. She just looked asleep.

Catherine *takes the joint back.*

Catherine Oh good.

Silence.

Teresa It’s got the list on it. My organiser’s got the list on it.

Catherine *opens an envelope and reads a card.*

Catherine ‘My thoughts are with you at this sad time. Your mother was a wonder woman. Norman Pearson.’
Norman Pearson?

Teresa *takes the card from her and looks at it.*

Teresa Patterson. Norman Patterson.

Mary Who's he? And what does he mean 'wonder woman'?

Teresa I don't know. He's got an allotment.

Catherine I'm starving. Is anyone else hungry?

Mary Maybe they were having an affair.

Catherine Munch munch munch, I'd really like some Shreddies. Have we got any Shreddies, d'you think?

Teresa She was getting more and more confused. Everything was packing up. I tried everything. I offered her all sorts of things. I wanted to take her to that herbalist in Whitby. She wouldn't have any of it.

Mary I don't think the colonic irrigation was a very good idea. Not for Alzheimer's disease.

Teresa You don't know the first thing about colonics –

Mary I do know that your colon is specifically designed to function independently, without recourse to a foot pump.

Teresa She never took care of herself, that's the problem.

Mary She was seventy-five. She died. Let her be.

Teresa She still smoked.

Mary So what?

Teresa She died because her heart gave out because she never ever looked after herself properly.

Mary I don't think that's strictly true.

Teresa You're a doctor, you know it's true.

Mary OK. It's all her own fault. She ate sliced white bread so she deserved to die. Whereas you wouldn't have it in the house, so you'll probably manage to avoid death altogether. That's the general idea, isn't it? While the rest of us deserve all we get, because we've been recklessly cavalier in the diet

department. Or we couldn't quite stomach six feet of plastic tubing being shoved up our bottoms –

Teresa Thank God you're not my doctor –

Mary Thank God you're not my patient –

Teresa I'm just saying, if you eat properly –

Mary And I'm just saying people die. You can't avoid it. Not even you.

Teresa Well, you two managed to avoid it pretty comprehensively when it came to Mum. Most of the time you weren't even here.

Mary Great. The guilt fest. I knew we'd get there eventually.

Catherine It's no good trying to make me feel guilty because I don't.

Teresa I didn't think for a moment you would.

Catherine You'd like me to, though, and I won't. I refuse. I've nothing to feel guilty about at all. I didn't like her.

Mary Who?

Catherine Mum.

Teresa Don't be ridiculous.

Catherine She didn't like me.

Mary Yes she did.

Catherine How do you know?

Teresa She was your mother.

Catherine I had a horrible childhood.

Teresa We all had the same childhood. It wasn't horrible.

Catherine Mine was.

Mary That's because you're an egomaniac.

Catherine She thought I was the menopause.

Mary Who told you that?

Catherine She did. She had the cat put down without telling me. She shut me in a cupboard. She said it was an accident but it wasn't.

Mary When did she do all this?

Catherine I never had the right shoes. She wouldn't let me visit you in hospital when you had an exploding appendix. She did it deliberately. She excluded me from everything. She made me stay in the shop after closing time and count nails.

Mary When I think of our childhood, we went on a lot of bike rides and it was always sunny.

Teresa Well, it was for you. You couldn't put a foot wrong.

Catherine When I think of it, it was always pissing down. And what bike? I never had one.

Teresa I'm sure you came to the beach with us, I remember it –

Catherine The only time I went to the beach, it was with you and you left me there. You forgot me. You didn't remember till you got home and Mum said, 'Where's Catherine?'

Teresa That was Mary. She was too young, she was being a pain and showing off in Esperanto, so we ran away and left her. With no bus fare and the tide coming in.

Catherine It was me!

Mary No it wasn't. It was me.

Catherine So how come I remember it?

Mary Because I told you about it and you appropriated it because it fits. If it was horrible, it must have happened to you. And she didn't have the cat put down, it just died.

Teresa It got run over by a combine harvester actually.

Catherine I don't remember any of this.

Teresa The amount of chemicals you've had through your system, I'm surprised you can remember anything at all.

Catherine You did leave me at the beach. Someone left me at the beach. I remember it vividly. I've got a brilliant memory. I remember everything.

Teresa You've forgotten Lucy's birthday every year since she was born –

Mary You'd go mad if you remembered everything. What would be the point? Your head would burst. There's an illness actually, a sort of incontinent memory syndrome, where you recall everything, absolutely everything, in hideous detail, and it's not a blessing, it's an affliction. There's no light and shade, no difference between the trivial and the vital, no editing system whatsoever.

She looks at Catherine.

Actually, Catherine, maybe you should come in for a few tests.

Catherine You're doing it again!

Teresa *has spied something under the bed. She picks it up: her electronic organiser.*

Teresa I've found it. I've found my list.

She consults her gadget.

Insurance – undertakers 10.30, bridge rolls – I think there's just the flowers left –

Catherine Do we have to do this now?

Teresa It won't get done on its own. If it was up to you two, she'd have to cremate herself –

Mary All right, all right –

Teresa Because while you were doing Spanish dancing with Pepe in Fuengirola –

Catherine His name's Xavier and I've never been to Fuengirola in my life –

Teresa I was watching her fall apart. Twenty miles here, twenty miles back. Three times a week.

Catherine I spoke to her a week ago. She wasn't that bad. She said she was off to the hairdresser's.

Teresa Oh, for goodness' sake, she was mad as a snake. And I'm the one who dealt with it all.

Mary I'm sure when they publish a new edition of *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* they'll devote a chapter entirely to you.

Teresa Every month something else went, another wire worked itself loose. Not big things, little things. She used to put her glasses in the oven. 'What day is it?' she'd say, and I'd say, 'Wednesday,' and she'd say 'Why?' 'Well, it just is. Because yesterday was Tuesday.' And she'd say, 'There was a woman here with a plastic bucket. Who is she?' 'Elaine. You know Elaine. Your home help.' And then she'd look at me and we'd start all over again. 'What day is it?' I mean, she wasn't even that old.

Silence. She takes some sheets of photographs from her bag.

Anyway. I got these photos from the florist. There's a number under each picture, so if you just give me the number of the wreath you want, I can phone in the order.

*She hands the photos to **Mary**, who gives them a cursory glance.*

Mary I'll have the one in the shape of a football.

Teresa I'm just trying to keep things in a neutral gear, that's all.

Mary Choosing flowers for your mother's funeral is not what I'd call a neutral activity.

*The phone rings. **Teresa** and **Mary** both make a grab for it. **Mary** wins.*

Mary Hello? . . . Hello?

Catherine Is it Xavier?

Mary Hello?

Teresa Give it to me.

Mary There's just a crackling sound. Hello, can you hear me?

Teresa *grabs the receiver.*

Teresa Frank?

Catherine It'll be Xavier.

Mary *grabs it back.*

Mary Mike?

The line goes dead. She puts the receiver down. Silence.

It's like waiting for the relief of Mafeking.

Silence.

Catherine Does anyone want a sandwich?

Mary *gets out of bed and rifles through her suitcase for clothes.*

Catherine *begins to go.*

Catherine I went to this brilliant funeral in Madrid –

She goes out.

Mary Brilliant. You went to a brilliant funeral.

Catherine *(off)* He was a friend of Xavier's who fell off a roof and at the party afterwards they had little bowls of cocaine –

Mary Oh, what a good idea. That'll go down well with the St Vincent de Paul Society.

Catherine *(off)* And they dyed his poodle black. Just for the funeral. It was washable dye so it wasn't cruel, but anyway, it was raining and God, you should have seen the state of the carpets afterwards. So that was a bit of a disaster, but later on there was a firework display and he went up in a rocket.

Mary Who?

Catherine *(off)* The person who was dead. Not the poodle.

Mary We're not doing that to Mum.

Catherine *reappears in the doorway carrying a bread knife.*

Catherine I'm just saying that funerals don't have to be depressing. They can be quite happy.

Mary Farcical even.

Catherine Scrambled eggs. That's what I want. I bet we haven't got any eggs –

Exit Catherine.

Mary I keep having dreams about her.

Teresa Who?

Mary Mum.

Teresa *opens a card.*

Teresa Thank God. I thought you meant Catherine. It's bad enough having her in the same house without dreaming about her as well.

Mary She's about fortyish and she's always wearing that green taffeta dress.

Teresa 'With deepest sympathy from Winnie and the boys. Sorry we won't be able to make the funeral due to a hip replacement op.'

Mary I've never heard of any of these people, have you? And there's this smell in the dream.

Teresa Can you dream smells?

Mary I think so.

Teresa I can't.

Mary It was that perfume she used to wear. In a tiny bottle, she got it in Woolworth's, and on Saturday night when she

leaned over to say good night, she smelt of cigarettes and face powder and something alcoholic, and this perfume.

Teresa Phul Nana.

Mary Phul Nana . . . that was it . . . the whole room smelt of it.

Teresa She always said, if you don't wear perfume you'll never find a man.

Mary You'll never get a boyfriend.

Teresa And then, frankly –

Mary Unless you're a nun.

Teresa You might as well cut your throat with the bread knife.

Mary I don't know how she managed to give birth to three daughters and then send us out into the world so badly equipped. She'd have sent us up K2 in slingbacks. With matching handbags.

Teresa She must have taught us something, otherwise we'd all be dead.

Pause.

Did she ever mention sex to you?

Mary *gives her a withering look.*

Teresa No, I suppose not.

Mary I found a box of sanitary towels in her wardrobe once. I was nine. I said, 'What are these?' I mean, I knew they were something bad, but I was desperate, I dared myself to ask. I was thinking all sorts of things. She snatched the box off me and said, 'Put that back. It's a home perm kit.'

There is a banging noise at the window.

Teresa What was that?

Mary There's something at the window . . .

28 The Memory of Water

Teresa Hello . . . ?

The sound comes again.

Oh God, it's like *Wuthering Heights*.

Mary Someone wants to come in.

Teresa Well, open the window.

Mary You do it.

Teresa Oh, for goodness' sake –

She goes to the window and opens it, screams.

Mike Sorry . . .

Mary Mike . . . Oh Jesus . . . Teresa, this is Mike . . .

Teresa Hello.

Mike I've been ringing the doorbell.

Teresa It's broken.

Mike Yes.

Pause.

I'd like to come in, if that's not too much trouble. Otherwise, you know, I could just stand here and die, apparently it's a nice way to go, freezing, you don't feel a thing, you just drift off into oblivion –

Mary Oh God, yes, sorry, I'll open the door –

Mike For Christ's sake –

He climbs in through the window, covered in snow.

Mary How long have you been there?

Mike Hours.

Mary Sorry. Here, give me your coat.

Teresa We thought you were Heathcliff. At the window.

Mike Drink. I need a drink.

Mary (*taking off his outer clothes*) Heathcliff wasn't at the window. He was inside. It was Cathy trying to get in.

Mike Sorry?

Teresa Are you sure?

Catherine *appears, eating a sandwich and smoking another joint. She has a glass in her hand.*

Catherine Who's this?

Mary Mike, this is Catherine. Catherine, this is Mike.
He tries to smile.

Mike Sorry, can't speak. Frozen.

Catherine Mike the married boyfriend Mike?

Mary *fetches the whisky.*

Teresa Would you like a cup of tea?

Catherine You don't look a bit like you do on the television. You're quite small really, aren't you?

Mike People say this to me all the time, but I'm not actually.

Catherine Mind you, you'd never think Robert Redford was only five foot five, would you?

Mary *snatches the glass from* **Catherine**.

Mary Give me that.

Fills it and gives it to **Mike**.

Catherine They always do this to me. So, how tall are you?

Mike I'm five eleven.

Catherine Don't be ridiculous, I don't believe you.

Teresa *hisses at her.*

Teresa Catherine . . .

Catherine Sorry, would you like some drugs?

She holds the joint out to him. Mike shakes his head.

Are you not allowed?

Mary He doesn't. Come here, sit down.

He sits on the bed and she rubs his hands, undoes his shoes and takes them off.

Mike I think I've got frostbite.

Catherine I won't tell anyone. Or I'll say you did but you didn't inhale.

Mike I'm sorry?

Catherine That's what celebrities usually say.

Mary He's not a celebrity, he's a doctor.

Catherine I saw your programme yesterday. That woman with the psoriasis. God. I thought you were really good.

Mike Thank you –

Catherine But you don't want to be caught with a joint in your hand, do you? On top of everything else. You can't be a drug addict and be having an affair. Can you imagine the papers? 'TV Doctor blew my mind says hospital consultant' –

Mary Catherine, you're off your face –

Teresa Why don't you come with me and make some tea for everyone?

Catherine Our mother's just died.

Mike I know. I'm very sorry.

Catherine *bursts into tears.*

Mary I'm sorry about this, Mike. Catherine, stop it –

Catherine God, is no one allowed to show their feelings around here? I'm depressed, I've suffered a bereavement, it's normal to cry, for God's sake –

Mary Go away, stop doing this –

Mike It's OK, it's OK, she's allowed to be unhappy –

Catherine You see? It's only you two who are weird, you don't know what it's like –

Teresa (*storming out*) That's it. I'm getting a gun.

Catherine *throws herself on the bed and howls.*

Catherine We're orphans . . .

Mike *puts his arm around her. She holds on to him, puts her head in his lap.*

Catherine And I'm the youngest, I had them for less time than everyone else did . . .

Mary Catherine, get up off that bed and get out –

Mike She's OK, she can't help it, what's the matter with you?

Mary And you shut up, you know nothing. Catherine, if you don't get out of here, so help me God, I'll brain you.

Catherine *gets up weakly, weeping. She manages to look tiny and pathetic. She turns as she gets to the door.*

Catherine I've got that pain again . . .

Mike What pain? Where?

She totters over to Mike and lifts her sweater up.

Catherine Just here . . .

Mary There's nothing wrong with you.

Catherine She keeps saying that to me –

The phone rings. She stops weeping immediately, and grabs it.

Hello? . . . Xavier? . . . Fuck . . . OK . . . OK . . . You're where? OK, I'll tell her.

She slams the phone down.

It's bloody Frank . . .

She storms out and slams the door.

(Off.) Teresa!

Mary I'm sorry. I'm sorry. You have to just ignore her. You don't understand.

Mike Why are you being so horrible to her?

Mary Where d'you want me to start?

Mike OK, OK, OK, come here –

She puts her arms around him and they kiss. It grows passionate. Eventually she pulls away.

Mary This is my mother's bed.

Mike I know. Sorry. So.

Mary So.

Mike How are you?

Mary Fine.

Mike Good.

Mary Is something wrong?

Mike I've been stuck on a train in a snowdrift all night.

Mary Sorry.

Pause.

Did you bring that paper I asked you for?

Mike *squirms apologetically.*

Mike I couldn't remember the title.

Mary 'A Trophic Theory of Neural Connections'. Why didn't you write it down?

Mike I didn't think, I mean, I didn't realise you needed it that badly. I thought you'd have enough on your plate. I mean, it's ridiculous, it's an obsession. What's the big deal

about this patient? You've seen post-traumatic amnesia before, it's not that unusual –

Mary It's not an obsession. I've got close to him, that's all.

Mike How can you get close to someone who can't remember his own name?

Mary Forget it. I'll look up the paper when I get back.

Pause.

Everything all right at home?

Mike The same, you know.

Pause.

Mary Mike.

Mike What?

Mary D'you love me?

Mike Yes.

Mary Say it then.

Mike I love you. Now you.

Mary Now I what?

Mike Now you say it. That's the form.

Mary Oh, this is ridiculous.

Mike You started it.

Silence.

Mary So. She's better then?

Mike Who?

Mary Chrissie.

Mike No. Why? What d'you mean?

Mary I saw a photo of the two of you. In the hospital magazine. At a tombola, for Christ's sake. And there she was,

large as life. Fit as a fiddle. And I thought, where's the intravenous drip? What happened to her catheter? I suppose it spoilt the line of her dress, did it?

Mike Mary –

Mary I'm sorry, I can't help it, it brings out something horrible in me. I mean you always give the impression she's at death's door, practically in an iron lung –

Mike Don't exaggerate –

Mary I'm exaggerating? You said she could hardly walk. Well, forgive me, but either that picture's trick photography, or she's doing the shagging twist –

Mike She was feeling a bit better.

Mary God, what's the matter with me? It's Catherine, she makes me want to kill people, and right now I want to kill your wife, which is irrational and I'm sorry.

Mike You're in shock.

Mary I'm not in shock. But let me just say this: people don't get off their deathbeds for a tombola.

Mike I'm sorry I went to a party with my wife. I'm sorry she's not as ill as you'd like her to be. Perhaps you'd prefer her to be dead too. For fuck's sake, Mary. What d'you want me to say?

Mary I feel humiliated! I've rationalised, I've philosophised, I've come to terms with the fact that I'm living in some nether world with different rules where we don't do Christmas, we don't do bank holidays, and if you die I'll be the last to find out. I accept this because your wife's supposed to be incapable of crossing the street on her own, and now I discover her hopping round a dance floor like a bag of ferrets. I know I'm not supposed to feel things like humiliation or fury or jealousy because they're irrational but sometimes I do, sometimes I just do, OK?

Silence.

Mike I'm sorry.

Pause.

I think I've got hypothermia. Can I get into bed? I'll keep my clothes on.

Mary She'd probably quite like the idea of a man in her bed. Get in.

He gets into bed. She sits down on the chair.

Mike Don't stay over there. Come and sit with me.

Mary I'm fine here.

Mike Come on. Please. I've come all this way. The heating broke down on the train, the lights went, and just when we thought we were out of the woods, there were frozen points, and the buffet car ran out of food. We sat in the middle of nowhere and I started to worry about who we'd eat first if things got really out of hand. The man opposite me looked like Margaret Rutherford. I tried to imagine filleting him with a pocket penknife.

Mary I'll sit on the bed. I'm not getting into it.

She perches primly next to him. He kisses her. She brings her feet up, but pulls her mouth away from his. Lies next to him on top of the covers. He puts his arm round her.

I'm sorry. This is making me very tense. It just feels weird.

Mike Sorry, sorry, sorry.

He puts his hands behind his head.

Mary He can remember his own name actually.

Mike Who?

Mary That patient. It's coming back in bits. If you show him a bike, he can ride it. He can't remember what it's called, that's all.

Mike I was talking to someone the other day who'd worked in this lab in France a few years back . . . or maybe he knew

someone who worked there, I can't remember. Anyway, they were doing these experiments with water, because they were researching the efficacy of homeopathy, and what they came up with after months and months of apparently stringent tests was that you can remove every last trace of the curative element from a water solution and it will still retain its beneficial effect. And they decided that this meant water was like magnetic tape. That water had memory. You can dilute and dilute and dilute, but the pertinent thing remains. It's unseen, undetectable, untraceable, but it still exerts influence. I mean, they did a full range of tests. It wasn't just a shot in the dark.

Pause.

It's all complete bollocks, of course. Except . . .

Mary Except what?

Mike I've got an erection.

Pause.

Mary We can't. We absolutely can't.

Mike No.

Mary It'll go away if we ignore it.

He leans over and kisses her. After a while she pulls away and gets up. She walks about the room, picking up objects from the dressing-table, putting them down.

Everything I look at makes me want to cry. I see these things and a life unravels in front of my eyes. I can't sleep for remembering.

Mike What?

Pause. Mary is nervous.

Mary Can you feel nostalgia for something that never really existed? I remember growing up here. I remember nightlights and a doll's house. I can see them in my mind's eye. And I'm not sure we had either. I find myself aching, longing for it. This half-imagined childhood.

Mike You want to be a child again?

Pause.

Mary I want to go through it again. The light on the landing, the bedtime stories. Even though I know some of the memories aren't real. It's like I've hooked up to some bigger, general picture, and it *feels* so real I can taste it.

Pause.

I think I'm pregnant.

Pause.

Mike What?

Mary You heard me.

Mike You can't be.

Mary I am.

Mike You can't possibly be.

Mary I know I'm geriatric, but I'm not completely desiccated –

Mike Hang on a minute, this is ridiculous –

Mary It's not ridiculous.

Mike Have you done a test?

Mary No, but I feel very strange.

Mike What d'you mean, strange?

Mary As in I'm-pregnant strange, what d'you think I mean?

Mike I'm not going to believe this till you've done a test.

Mary I'm the size of a house. Look at me.

Mike You always look like that, don't you?

Mary Observant. There's another thing you're not.

Pause.

I feel weird.

Mike You can't. You can't feel weird.

Mary Well, I do.

Mike This is unreal. This is completely unreal. I don't believe this is happening –

Mary Stop getting in a state, will you?

Mike I'm not getting in a fucking state!

Silence.

What are you going to do?

Mary What am *I* going to do? What happened to *we*?

Mike OK, OK, we.

Mary Well, I kind of hoped for the usual. You know, nine months' gestation followed by birth of something small and squalling. Preferably human. Or perhaps I'm asking for too much.

Mike Let's not panic about it, OK?

Mary I'm not panicking. You are.

Mike I'm not. I'm not. I mean you're probably not. Pregnant.

Mary I am.

She climbs on the bed next to him and kisses him. Puts her hand on his groin.

Brilliant. I'm pregnant. Instant detumescence.

Silence.

Mike I think . . . I don't think . . . you know, I mean, the thing is, I'm trying to say –

Mary It might make the papers, your wife will be humiliated, you can't cope and you're leaving me.

Mike No, that's not what I'm trying to say.

Pause.

You're sure you're pregnant?

Mary Would you like it in writing?

Mike I have to tell you there's a problem here. The thing is. How can I put this? The thing is, it's not mine. I mean if you are, it's not mine –

Mary Just run that past me again, will you?

Mike I've had a vasectomy.

Silence.

Mary What?

Mike I've had a vasectomy.

Mary You've had a vasectomy.

Mike Yes.

Silence.

Mary When?

Mike Before I met you.

She stares at him.

I wanted to tell you. I was going to, and then . . . it didn't seem important, I suppose . . .

Mary It didn't seem important.

Mike No . . . I mean . . . I just . . . You never . . . I mean it never came up . . . I thought you didn't want children. You never said. I thought, you know, you had a career and everything.

Mary You've got a career. You've also got three children.

Mike I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Why didn't you say anything? Why didn't you tell me you wanted a child?

Mary I'm thirty-nine, Mike. I'm thirty-nine. Didn't you ever think?

Mike I'm not a mind-reader. You never showed the slightest sign. You never even hinted.

Pause.

Mary I thought you'd leave me.

Mike You thought I'd leave you?

Mary I thought you'd leave me if I said I wanted a child.

The door opens and Teresa comes in carrying a lot of black bin liners.

Teresa You're going to hate me for this – oh, for goodness' sake.

Mary and Mike *spring apart. Mary gets up.*

Mary We were just talking.

Mike *gets out of bed.*

Mike Look, fully dressed –

Catherine *comes in with another joint.*

Catherine Oh God, have you two been in bed? That's disgusting.

Mary What? Look, Mike and I are trying to have a conversation –

Teresa We have to sort out her clothes.

Catherine Why do we have to do it now?

Teresa *is already taking clothes out of the wardrobe.*

Teresa A friend of mine's sending a truck to Zimbabwe and I promised I'd have them ready this afternoon.

Mary She's not even in her grave yet, and apart from that –

Teresa If we wait until after the funeral, I'll get left with it all.

Mary Teresa, listen –

Teresa No. You listen. If it wasn't for me, nothing would

ever get done. She'd be lying on the floor stoned out of her brains, you'd be having it off in our dead mother's bed and I'd be holding the fort –

Catherine St Teresa of Avila –

Teresa Somebody has to be practical! Somebody has to be in charge, you two can live in chaos but I can't –

Catherine What chaos?

She is rifling through the clothing, holding frocks up in front of herself.

What's this made of, d'you think? Is it silk?

Mike Maybe I should, you know –

Mary Don't even think about it –

Mike Fine.

Mary I'm in shock, I still can't believe you –

Teresa The sooner we get this over with the better. Right. I've worked it out. We divide it into two lots. Crap and good stuff.

Catherine The crap we send to the poor bastards in Zimbabwe –

Teresa The crap we take to the dump.

Catherine I quite like this. Can I have it?

*She holds up a dress in front of her and hands the joint to **Teresa**, who puffs at it absent-mindedly as she sorts through the clothes.*

Mike Um, what would you like me to do?

Mary I don't know. Hang yourself.

She picks up the whisky and takes a slug.

Mike D'you think you should be drinking? I mean –

Mary Just lie down and die, will you?

Teresa Mike, you take these bags. This one for rubbish, this one for good stuff. We'll hand it to you, you pack it.

Mike Right. OK. This one rubbish, this one good stuff . . .

Teresa *takes another armful from the wardrobe and throws it on the bed.* **Mary** *stands stricken, staring at it.* **Catherine** *is posing in mirrors, holding up frocks.*

Teresa Oh, for goodness' sake, Mary. I know it's not a very nice job, but it has to be done.

Mary OK, OK.

She picks up some clothes dispiritedly. **Catherine** *picks up a gaudy floral number.*

Catherine God, d'you remember this? What a mistake.

She dances round with the dress in front of her.

Teresa I think that can go in the crap pile.

Catherine They might like it in Zimbabwe.

Teresa She wore that terrible hat with it, d'you remember?

Catherine *scrabbles through the pile. She picks up a hat.*

Catherine Here it is, here it is –

Teresa *begins to giggle. She takes another puff of the joint.*

Mary Is this what you add up to? A wardrobe full of tat and three pelican children?

Teresa Oh dear, I do feel light-headed . . . have some of this, Mary, it's all so much easier . . . pure thingy . . .

Catherine Grass.

Teresa Exactly, no chemicals.

She takes one more draw and hands the joint to Mary. **Catherine** *has put the hat on, and is draping the dress around her.*

Teresa Cousin June's wedding. 1969.

Catherine It was horrible even then. D'you remember we didn't want to sit next to her in church.

Mary Give it to me. (*Takes it, hands it to Mike.*) This is for the rubbish.

Mike Are you sure? Maybe we should have another bag for kind of in-betweens.

Catherine *snatches the dress back.*

Catherine No, no it's you, Mary, it's perfect –

She holds it against Mary who throws it aside. Mike puts it in the rubbish. Teresa yells.

Teresa Aargh, look at this –

She pulls out a sixties cocktail frock from the pile on the bed.

Catherine *doubles up with laughter.*

Teresa She can't have worn this, surely.

Catherine She did, I remember it, oh God, give it here.

She takes the dress and begins to struggle out of her clothes.

Mary Catherine, for Christ's sake –

Catherine I'm wearing underwear. Anyway, he's a doctor, stop being such a pain –

There is a great cry of triumph from Teresa, who has been rooting around in the pile.

Teresa Yes!

She brings out a wild pink dress, circa 1963.

This was her Alma Cogan phase. Which I think, on reflection, I prefer to the crimplene phase that followed it.

Mary Teresa, are we sorting out these clothes or not because I've got better things to do at the moment?

Teresa I mean, what *was* crimplene, was it a sort of by-product of Formica?

She is holding the dress up against her in front of the mirror.

Mary Oh, this is ridiculous –

Teresa Actually, margarine, you know, is a by-product of plastic. Or is it petrol?

Catherine *has got the dress on, and a hat.*

Catherine What d'you think? Is it me?

Teresa *laughs with stoned hysteria. Even Mike laughs.*

Mary And I don't know why you're laughing –

The room is in chaos. Catherine and Teresa are unstoppable now.

Catherine *is trying on shoes, hats, lipstick. Earrings, anything.*

Teresa Turn away, Mike, turn away –

She goes behind the wardrobe door.

Mary I give up. Give that to me.

She takes the rubbish sack from Mike and starts to stuff clothing into it.

Mary Who did it?

Mike What?

Mary The operation. Who did the operation?

Mike Charlie Morgan. Why?

She starts to laugh.

Mary Charlie Morgan?

Catherine Who's Charlie Morgan? Oh, look, I've found a hairpiece from before the Boer War. Look at this –

Mike Is there a problem with that?

Mary No, no, no. Honestly.

Teresa *emerges from behind the wardrobe door, looks in the mirror.*

Teresa Oh God, what do I look like?

Mike So what's funny?

Mary Charlie-whoops-I've-made-a-bit-of-a-hash-of-this-Morgan.

Mike Oh, for God's sake, that's a slanderous rumour, he's OK.

Mary He's in a clinic at the moment. Drying out.

Mike He did me years ago. He was steady as a rock.

Mary You didn't notice an overpowering smell of aftershave?

Mike Christ. He wasn't drinking it, was he?

Teresa (*scrabbling around in the bottom of the wardrobe*) Where're those pink shoes?

Mary He's about to be struck off –

Catherine Oh, look at this –

Mary Gross professional negligence, I think it was –

Catherine Mary, this is you –

She holds out the green dress which Vi wore at the beginning of Act One.

Teresa Oh, put it on –

Mike Are you sure?

Mary Give me some of that joint, Catherine – positive –

Teresa D'you think I need a handbag with this?

Mary I can't believe you went to Charlie Morgan. Did he give you a special price or something?

Mary *takes the dress and starts to struggle into it, giggling.*

Mike Are you making this up?

Catherine Go for it, Mary!

Mary Performing microsurgery when he was so drunk he had double vision.

Mike I think you're exaggerating a bit –

Mary I am not –

Catherine You need bigger hair. Big, crispy hair.

Teresa Yes, you see, you didn't get shiny hair in those days, did you? Honestly, all that hairspray, think of the carcinogens. Now, d'you think this bag or this –

She holds up two. Mary has got the frock on now.

Mary There. What d'you think?

Catherine You look dead like Mum.

Momentary silence, before they realise, then screeches of appalled laughter.

Teresa and **Catherine** roll on the bed, clutch their sides. Wild, stoned hysteria, etc. **Mary** joins in. The door opens and **Frank** comes in, in his overcoat, carrying a suitcase.

Frank What the fuck . . . ?

Silence.

Teresa Frank . . .

Frank What are you doing?

Mary We're sorting out Mum's clothes . . .

Pause.

Catherine D'you think we're sick?

Frank *looks at his watch.*

Frank It's taken me fourteen hours to get here from Düsseldorf. I spent six of those sitting next to a woman from Carlisle who runs a puppet theatre for the deaf. She'd maroon hair and drank an entire bottle of gin while telling me about her alcoholic father who once bit the head off a chicken. She was wearing a dress that looked like a candlewick bedspread and she'd been on a course in Cologne learning mime and North African devil dancing. I thought, take me back to sanity. And I walk in on this. Pan's bloody People.

Silence. The women suppress their hysteria.

Mike I'm Mike. Hi.

Frank How d'you do. And then I got diverted to East Midlands.

Mike Goodness.

Frank What is it with this country? It's too hot, it's too cold, there's leaves on the line, it's the wrong sort of snow –

Catherine Frank, chill out, have some drugs –

They all begin to giggle uncontrollably.

Frank How long have they been like this?

Mike I think it's the grief, you know . . .

The women get more hysterical. They hold on to each other and look at themselves in the mirror. They scream with laughter.

Mary Oh God, what do we look like.

Catherine Where's my camera, where's my camera?

She goes to her bag and scrabbles around. Pulls out a camera.

Teresa Oh yes, we've got to have a photo –

Frank Don't be ridiculous –

Catherine Frank, you take it –

She hands it to him. They all chant together like a football mob.

All Photo, photo, photo –

Frank OK, OK . . .

The women chant and pose and laugh hysterically.

Christ, they're a handful when they all get together. They just gang up, you'll get used to it . . . all right, all right, pull yourselves together . . . Where d'you want to be . . . ?

They all line up in front of the bed, linking arms and staggering and pushing each other.

Mary OK, OK, smile everyone!

Catherine I want to be in the middle!

*They arrange and rearrange themselves. **Frank** takes a photo. A flash. Freeze frame: the women smiling in a row, arms linked. We realise there's a fourth person in the line-up: **Vi**, smiling, cigarette held aloft, in her green taffeta dress.*

Act Two

Scene One

Lights up on stage exactly as before. Vi and Mary are alone. Vi gives her a long look.

Vi You look ridiculous in that.

Mary The tin with the chrysanthemums on it. The one you don't remember. Where is it?

Vi I told you. I've no idea.

Mary What have you done with it?

Vi You need a bit of colour on your face. You were always pasty.

Mary Don't change the subject. Where's the tin?

Pause.

Vi Have you tried the shed?

Mary No.

Vi It might be in the shed.

Mary I'll look then.

Vi Although it might not. It's been years since I saw that tin. It had toffees in it originally. From Torquay. I'd have liked to have gone there. They have palm trees. I've never seen a palm tree in real life. I expect you've seen dozens. You're probably sick to death of palm trees.

Mary *pulls on jeans and sweaters.*

Vi I do wish you'd wear something a bit more feminine occasionally.

Mary Apparently I look ridiculous. I'm going to look for the tin.

She begins to go but Vi stops her.

Vi This patient. The one you've got all the books about. What's wrong with him?

Mary He got hit on the head and lost his memory.

Vi *gives a soft laugh.*

Vi So what's your prognosis? Doctor.

Mary He'll recover. More or less intact. I think.

Vi Intact. I like that word. Intact. Everything in order. In the bag. Right as ninepence. That's nice. Was he in a fight?

Mary No, he opened a cupboard and a jar fell on him.

Vi Must have been a big jar.

Mary Pickled bell peppers.

Vi You wouldn't get pickled bell peppers up here. Probably a good thing. They sound dangerous.

Mary Can I go now?

Vi *has taken a dress from the pile.*

Vi Look. D'you remember this?

Mary No.

Vi I loved this dress. It was the only dress your father ever bought me.

She begins to dance. It's slightly seductive and sensuous.

Saturday nights I used to wear this. The men loved me, you know. Oh yes. All the men loved me. And I loved the men. I never cared for the women. I never liked them. Once I got my first bra I couldn't be doing with them any more.

Mary Pity you had three daughters really, isn't it?

Vi *stops dancing.*

Vi You put words into my mouth. Every one of you does it, but you in particular, you mangle everything into something

else. My comedy mother. My stupid, bigoted, ignorant mother.

Mary Well, you shouldn't say such stupid things.

Vi You lie in bed with your lovers and you tell stories about me. None of them complimentary. Most of them complaining. None of them true.

Mary Excuse me. I'm going to look for that tin.

She turns to go.

Vi Don't walk away from me! You've done that all your life.

Mary *turns round, like a guilty child.* **Vi** *picks up a book from the bedside table and opens it at random.*

Vi *(reading)* 'A biological memory system differs from a simple information storage device, by virtue of its inherent ability to use information in the service of its own survival . . . A library, for example, couldn't care less about its own survival. The problem is not one of storage. The problem is the difference between a dead and a living system.'

She shuts it.

So there's a difference between a cat and a bookcase. I could have told him that.

She looks at the price on the back of the book.

Twenty-five ninety-nine. My God.

Puts it down.

I don't know how this happened. I look at you and I think, you've come out wrong, all of you. There's something not quite right about how you've turned out. Not what I expected.

Mary What a pity. After all your sterling efforts.

Vi You seem like nice, personable people. I expect you are, but I don't know what you've got to do with me. You're closed off. I can't seem to get the hang of any of you. You don't tell

me anything. I tell you things. What I did, where I went. And you just look irritated. You've no patience with me. No tolerance. And I had years of patience with you. It's not fair. How dare you? That's what I feel. How dare you?

Mary How dare I what?

Vi Sometimes when I'm talking and I know you're not really listening, I could tear your heads from your bodies. I could tear you apart with my teeth. All of you. You behave as if I'd no hand in the making of you. I took you on picnics, I got up in the night for you. And you remember the things you didn't have. Holidays not gone on. Bicycles never got. A particular type of shoe. How was I to know? When are we going to be done with this? I hear you talking and I think your memories aren't the same as mine. I remember the time of your childhood, and it seems to me that you don't remember it because you weren't there —

Mary Why are you doing this to me? Why don't you do it to Teresa or Catherine?

Vi How d'you know I don't?

She strokes the clothes left on the bed.

All my lovely dresses.

Mary I'm sorry. It's not as if you're going to be needing them.

She begins to stuff them into black bags.

Vi You were in my bed with him.

Mary He was cold. We didn't do anything.

Vi You wanted to.

Mary Has nothing changed? You used to read my diaries, you knew about every boyfriend I ever had. You used to poke about my room. I always knew you were doing it, I used to watch you.

Vi I had good reason.

Mary You did not. D'you understand? You did not. Ever. Nothing gave you the right to sift through my life like that.

Vi What is it you don't have? What's the word? Humility, is that it? I've watched you being offered the world on a plate. And all of it you've taken, without a backwards glance. Lovers, sex. Exotic sex probably. Whatever that is. All tasted and discarded. You take it in your stride, these trips to Paris, these shoes from Milan, this bottle of wine and not that one, this man and not that one. This choosing and refusing –

Mary You know nothing –

Vi I know different things. I know wanting and no choice. That counts too. It's not nothing. Excitement was a delivery of ornamental door knockers. You drink champagne because you feel like it, you buy things with plastic cards. I've wanted that. I've tasted bile in my mouth with wanting it. And you carry it so lightly, you're not even grateful. I look at your easiness with the world and I don't know how I spawned you. But I started it. I taught you to speak properly, I saved you from your own stupid mistakes –

Mary It wasn't stupidity, it was ignorance, and for that I blame you –

Vi I made sure you'd get somewhere, I made sure of it –

Mary Your idea of getting somewhere was marrying a dentist in a sheepskin coat from the Rotary Club –

Vi You invent these versions of me and I don't recognise myself –

Mary I'm not listening to you –

Vi I'm proud of you and you're ashamed of me –

Mary I am not –

Vi I hear you say it all the time. I'm not like my mother, I'm not, I'm not. I'm like my father. Look in the mirror. Why can't you see it? Everyone else can. Look at the curve of your cheek, look at your hands, the way they move. You're doing it

now. That's me. I got it from my mother. She got it from her mother. And on it goes, so far back that we don't know who began it or on what impulse, but we do it, we can't help it –

Mary I've inherited some of your gestures. So what?

Vi Don't try and reinvent yourself with me. I know who you are.

Mary You don't know anything.

Vi I look at you and I see myself.

Mary Have you finished?

Vi Never.

Go to black.

Scene Two

Same place. Catherine is praying to the telephone.

Catherine Ring ring ring, please God, make him ring. Holy Mary Mother of God, I'll come back to the church, I'll do anything, make him ring now. Xavier, listen to me, pick up the fucking phone, please, I'm going off my head. I can't stand this. Why are you doing this to me? It's not fair. I'm getting an ulcer, you're making me ill. OK, I'm going to count to ten and then I'm going to phone you. If you haven't phoned by the time I've finished this joint I'm going to ring you, can you hear me? Just pick up the phone and speak to me. You could be dead for all I know, you could have had an accident or anything. Xavier, this is killing me.

Mary comes in. Catherine looks at her.

Catherine God, I hate him.

She picks up the phone and taps out a number.

Hola? Xavier, por favor . . . Oh, right . . . It's Catherine . . .

Catherine . . . I just wondered if he got my message because I tried to leave a number but the line went dead . . . Oh, I see

... When? ... Well, what time were you thinking he might
... OK, could you tell him then, just tell him that I called,
and if he could –

The line goes dead.

Hello? Hello?

Teresa and **Frank** come in as she puts the phone down.

Teresa Did he call then?

Catherine Yeah, yeah, he just rang, that was him –

Mary turns and looks at her. **Catherine** refuses to catch her eye.

Teresa Where's Mike?

Mary I've put him in a hot bath, he'd gone a bit blue.

Teresa Look, we've got to sort these flowers out, just look
at the photos, will you? It'll take two minutes –

She hands the florist's book to Mary.

Catherine Poor thing, he hasn't had a chance to get to the
phone, there's been a flood in the restaurant, all the furniture's
bobbing around in three feet of water, it's a disaster, but it'll
come off the insurance, I suppose. So that's all right. Luckily.

Teresa Oh dear. Frank, take those bags out to the car.

Catherine I just hope he can make the funeral, I mean I
hope it's all sorted out so he can get a flight tonight, otherwise,
well, he won't, will he? Make the funeral.

Frank picks up an armful of black plastic.

Frank Had he ever met your mother?

Catherine He'd talked to her on the phone. Anyway,
what's that supposed to mean? God, why does everyone in this
house have to be so oblique and sneery, why can't anyone say
what they mean?

Frank Catherine, stop being so bloody paranoid –

Teresa Frank. Bags. Car. Now.

Frank *puts the bags down.*

Frank For Christ's sake, Teresa, I've only just thawed out.

Catherine Mike's never met her either and no one's complaining about him coming –

Teresa OK, OK, so what did he say?

Catherine Nothing. He said he'd phone back as soon as he knew what was happening. That's what he said. Stop interrogating me, OK?

Mary I'll have number seventeen B.

She hands the book back to Teresa.

Teresa *(looking at the photo)* She was allergic to lilies of the valley, choose something else –

Mary She's hardly going to start sneezing at her own funeral, is she?

She takes the book again. Frank grapples with the bags, one of which bursts open.

Frank Oh, for fuck's sake!

Mike *comes in wrapped in a towel, clutching his clothes. He looks at the assembled crowd.*

Teresa Sorry, Mike, d'you want to get dressed?

Mike No, no, I'm fine really, don't mind me.

Catherine I bet you've used all the water –

Mary *(handing the florist's book to Teresa)* Twenty-seven A, not a lily in sight, absolutely no chance of impetigo, hives, or nervous eczema for either mourners or deceased. Catherine, you choose and then could you all leave us in peace for five minutes?

Catherine Why are you always trying to get rid of me?

Teresa Oh, don't start, Catherine. Choose your wreath, for heaven's sake –

She tries to give her the book.

Catherine No, I always get this, ‘Bugger off, Catherine, we don’t want you here,’ well, what am I supposed to do? Teresa’s got Frank, you’ve got him, and what am I supposed to do on my own? I don’t want to sit in the living-room on my own while everyone else has smoochy secret conversations, it’s not fair, not at a time like this, but if that’s what you want –

She gets into the wardrobe and shuts the door.

Frank Have you ever thought of laying off the drugs for a while, Catherine?

Catherine Who asked you?

The phone rings. She dives out of the wardrobe and grabs it.

Hello? Xavier . . . God, how are you, where’ve you been? Did you get my . . . Oh, right . . . Oh . . . What? . . . Oh. Well, couldn’t you . . .

Long pause. She listens.

I don’t think we should . . . maybe we should talk about this when I get back . . . OK, bye.

She puts the phone down. They all look at her. Awkward silence.

He can’t come.

Teresa Because of the flood?

Catherine The what? Oh, no, well, yes, lots of things. Anyway, he’s not coming.

Silence.

Mike Are you all right?

Catherine Yeah. Yeah. He said he’d ring back later.

She gets up.

So. What is there still to do? Shall we sort the drawers out? There’s all the jewellery and stuff –

She goes to the dressing-table drawer and begins to rummage through it, taking things out haphazardly.

God, he's so funny sometimes, he's so apologetic. He was almost crying on the phone, you should have heard him. It's just a real drag he can't come, he's so lovely. Did I ever show you his photo? He's got beautiful teeth. I mean, he really, really wanted to come. It's just hopeless, you know, running a restaurant and everything, you never get any time off.

Mike Maybe you'd like a cup of tea?

Catherine I don't want any tea.

She takes a tin from the drawer and tries to open it.

Mike Right. OK.

Mary It's probably just as well he isn't coming. I mean, he wouldn't know anyone and it's a strange country and everything.

Catherine Yes. It's probably just as well.

*She hurls the tin across the room, narrowly missing **Frank**.*

Frank (*ducking*) Jesus –

Catherine Fuck it!

Silence. She bursts into racking sobs.

I went to this counsellor – did I tell you this? – or a therapist or something and she said I had this problem and the problem was, I give too much, I just do too much for other people, I'm just a very giving person, and I never get any credit for any of it. I haven't even got any friends. I mean, I have but I don't like most of them, especially the women, and I try really hard, it's just I'm very sensitive and I get taken for a ride, nothing ever goes right, every time, I mean, every time it's the same – like with men. What is it with men? I mean, I don't have a problem with men or anything. I love men. I've been to bed with seventy-eight of them, I counted, so obviously there's not a problem or anything, it's just he didn't even apologise or anything and how can he say on the phone he doesn't want to

see me any more? I mean, why now? Why couldn't he have waited? I don't know what to do, why does it always go wrong? I don't want to be on my own, I'm sick of people saying I'll be better off on my own, I'm not that sort of person, I can't do it. I did everything for him, I was patient and all the things you're supposed to be and people kept saying don't accept this from him, don't accept that, like, you know, when he stayed out all night, not very often, I mean once or twice, and everyone said tell him to fuck off, but how could I because what if he did? Because they all do, everyone I've ever met does, they all disappear and I don't know if it's me or what. I don't want to be on my own, I can't stand it, I know it's supposed to be great but I don't think it is. I can't help it, it's no good pretending, it's fucking lonely and I can't bear it.

She rushes out of the room. They look at each other. Silence. Frank picks up the tin.

Frank She nearly had my head off.

Mary Christ. I wonder what sort of therapist she went to. How could anyone in their right mind tell Catherine her problem was give give give?

She pours herself a whisky.

Mike Actually, it is, in a weird kind of way, she's trying to give you something all the time. It's usually inappropriate, that's all. I mean, she's obviously got some kind of problem.

Teresa Yes, we don't need you to tell us that, thank you –

Mike Sorry, she's just, I mean, pretty miserable and not very stable –

Teresa Thank you, doctor –

Frank Teresa –

Teresa Well, I'm sick of people feeling sorry for her. It's very easy the first time you meet her, but if you put up with her year in year out, you just want to kill her –

She takes the glass from Mary.

Teresa Give me some of that.

Frank Teresa, don't drink whisky, it makes you demented, you know that –

Teresa *knocks back the entire glass and grimaces.*

Teresa Salt.

Frank Don't drink it if it tastes of salt –

Teresa I thought you were taking those bags to the car –

Mike Maybe one of you should go and have a word with Catherine.

Teresa How dare you walk in here and pontificate?

Frank Put the bottle down, Teresa –

Mike I just meant –

Mary Don't get involved, Mike, please.

Mike I'm just saying from an outsider's point of view, she gets a rough deal. I know you can't see it, because your tolerance has run out, but actually she's a mess and nobody really listens to her –

Teresa Because she talks bollocks, that's why. I mean, this is rich, this is, coming from you, the man who's been two-timing his wife for the last five years telling us how to behave –

Frank Teresa, what the hell's this got to do with anything? Stop it.

Teresa No, why shouldn't I shout? Everyone else does in this house –

Frank I never said you were shouting –

Teresa Well, you're deaf then, because I am. Just answer me this, Mike –

Mary Just ignore her –

Teresa When are you going to do the decent thing? When are you going to leave your wife and marry my sister?

Frank Oh, for Christ's sake, this is none of your business, Teresa –

Teresa Well, it's about time someone asked –

Frank But not you, and not now, OK?

Mike It's very complicated.

Mary You don't have to answer, Mike, it's OK. Teresa, can we stop this right here?

Mike My wife's ill actually –

Teresa Oh, very convenient.

Mary She's got ME.

Teresa ME my arse.

Frank Teresa, I'm warning you –

Teresa What sort of illness is that?

Mary Stop it!

Teresa The sort of illness where you lie on the sofa for six months with a bit of a headache. It's not a proper illness. It's not a brain tumour. It's not as if she's got both her legs in traction. Let me tell you something, Mike.

Frank I don't think you should tell anybody anything right at this moment –

Teresa There's nothing wrong with your wife, Mike.

Mike Well, there is actually.

Teresa No. She knows you're having an affair so she thinks if she's ill, you won't leave her.

Frank Sorry about this, Mike, like you said, it's the grief, you know –

Mike Don't worry about it. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have stuck my oar in –

Frank Teresa, come on now, you're talking shite, come and have a lie-down.

Teresa Actually, I'm not talking shite. Actually. I've done it. I've got ill so people would be nice to me. I used to do it to my ex-husband. Sometimes it's all that's left to you. You get ill for a reason. You do it so people won't go.

Frank Teresa, I beg of you. Remember the last time. Three small gins, that's all. Took her bloody clothes off. In a car park.

Teresa I was hot.

Mary Give me the bottle. Now.

Teresa Don't tell me what to do, and stop looking so bloody superior, because you've no cause –

Mary His wife is ill. Genuinely ill. ME is real. It's not imaginary. OK?

Teresa You see. We're our mother's daughters. Always take the man's side even when he's a complete pile of crap –

Frank Teresa, that's enough –

Teresa Just like with Dad.

Mary Frank, get her out of here –

Teresa Our father, Mike, hardly spoke at all during the forty-eight years he was married to our mother. D'you remember hearing him speak, Mary? D'you recall him ever uttering a word of encouragement, an endearment?

Mary Teresa –

Teresa He was like a professional mute. And fucking someone else for most of the time.

Frank Right, that's it. Come on.

Teresa D'you know what his last words were, Mike?

Mike I don't, no.

Teresa 'Pass the mustard, Marjorie.'

Frank That was George the Fifth –

Teresa And she wasn't even called Marjorie. D'you understand?

Mary For Christ's sake, this is all bollocks.

Teresa Our mother's name was Violet and he said, 'Pass the mustard, Marjorie.' I think that just about sums him up.

Mary This is pure invention –

Teresa How do you know? You weren't there. As usual. Never there in a crisis, not even your own. It's always someone else does the clearing up. Always me and Mum.

Frank Teresa –

Teresa All those years she never said a word against him. Dad was always right, it was a perfect marriage. We've no secrets, she used to say. For heaven's sake. Who was she trying to kid?

Mary Teresa, please, I'm exhausted with this –

Teresa No! Who was she trying to kid? Tell me.

Mary I don't know. Herself. She was trying to kid herself. OK?

Frank Mike, believe me, I'm on your side –

Teresa She dyed her hair red, d'you remember that? Dad didn't even notice. Didn't say a word. I mean, you could hardly miss it, it was a disaster, dogs ran away from her in the street –

Mary He was being polite. He didn't want to hurt her –

Teresa Stop putting a gloss on him, he didn't bloody care. We could have had three heads and he'd not have noticed. Our entire bloody lives spent making sure nothing ruffled his feathers. He used to laugh at the word stress. 'Stress,' he'd say, 'what a lot of rubbish.' He said he didn't know what it was. Of course he bloody didn't. We did it for him. We had the stress for him. We contorted ourselves. Literally, in your case –

Mary I really don't want to get into this at the moment –

Teresa I don't believe he didn't know. How could he not bloody know? I mean, he might have been mute but he wasn't blind for goodness' sake –

Mary Yeah, well, it was a long time ago, let's just –

Teresa No, let's not, let's not just pretend it never happened –

Mary Nothing happened –

Teresa Bloody hell, how can you not notice that someone's eight months pregnant?

Silence.

Frank Who was eight months pregnant?

Silence.

Mary Me.

Pause.

Teresa She was fourteen.

Frank Are you serious?

Mary Yes. Anything else you'd like to know?

Mike You never told me –

Mary It was a long time ago. There's nothing to tell –

Teresa What d'you mean, there's nothing to tell?

Mary It's for me to tell or not. If I don't talk about it, that's my business. It didn't happen to you, it happened to me.

Teresa Oh, typical solipsistic bollocks. No one exists but you. Have you any idea what Mum and I went through?

Mary You went through nothing. What you went through was nothing, d'you understand me? No, I don't suppose you do, you stupid, unimaginative woman.

Frank You're really excelling yourself today, Teresa. Although personally, I think your timing's a bit off. Much

more effective if you'd waited till the funeral, and then got up and announced it to the congregation. You could have done it instead of the crappy Dylan Thomas poem. You'd have brought the house down.

Teresa I'm tired of it. Why should she sail through her life getting pats on the back as if she'd never put a foot wrong?

Frank It just strikes me as being a strange time to reveal it to the world, Teresa. I mean, it hardly qualifies as bereavement counselling –

Teresa You don't know the half of it –

She picks up the bottle again.

Frank If you take one more swig of that, your liver will explode –

Teresa Hiding it all from Dad. It was ridiculous, but of course Mary was Goody Two Shoes, Snow White and Our Lady of Lourdes all rolled into one as far as he was concerned, and we couldn't disabuse him of that convenient fiction, could we?

Mary This is a novel told entirely from your point of view –

Teresa Mum had to arrange everything, poor woman, all those lies about peritonitis and hospitals and God knows what –

Mary She put her hand over my mouth when the pains started. I bet you've forgotten that bit –

Teresa She did not. She found a lovely, Catholic family who brought him up in the true faith, while you got on with your true vocation of being the best at everything. No questions asked, never mention it again, it never happened, even Catherine doesn't know. Poor bloody Catherine, she's always complaining no one tells her anything, and she's right, no one ever did, no one ever will –

Mike So there's a grown-up son somewhere –

Teresa Mary this, Mary that, Mary's bloody homework, Mary's bloody exams. We used to creep around on tiptoes in

case her precious brain cells got thrown off-kilter by sudden exposure to pop music or someone slamming the front door. And all it's done is make her think she's immune, with her breathtaking fucking arrogance –

Mary This is a fabrication, this is a complete distortion of the truth –

Teresa And you still think you're unassailable, you still bloody do –

Mary You're drunk, I'm not listening to this –

She walks out furiously. Mike hurries after her.

Mike I'll just, er . . . Excuse me a minute – Mary –

Frank D'you know something, Teresa, you're not just embarrassing, you're really quite repulsive, when you're drunk. I'm going to give Mike some friendly advice: don't leave your wife. You don't want to marry into this lot. It's worse than the Borgias.

Teresa Oh, shut up.

She starts to cry. Long silence. Tears stream down her face.

I've wanted to cry for three days.

She takes another swig of whisky, sobbing.

The salt taste's gone.

Silence.

Say something, Frank.

Pause.

Frank I've been awake for thirty-six hours.

Pause.

Teresa You have a whole repertoire of silences, don't you?

Frank Sorry?

Teresa You've got a pissed-off one, and a resentful one, an I-hate-you-so-much-I'm-pretending-to-be-deaf one, and a worse one which is I-hate-you-so-much-I'm-pretending-to-be-foreign-and-I-don't-understand-anything-you're-saying. Your silences are the most eloquent thing about you. I can read them the way an Eskimo reads snow.

Frank Inuit.

Teresa What?

Frank Inuit. That's what they're called now. They don't like being called Eskimos any more.

Teresa How do you know? How many Eskimos have you ever met?

Frank Teresa, I'm shattered –

Teresa You're always shattered.

Frank What's that supposed to mean?

Teresa You come home, stare at the wall and pass out. You can fall asleep over a supermarket trolley, I've seen you, you can even do it with your eyes open so you look like you're awake –

Frank It's because you keep sending me to these bloody conferences, sales junkets, glee clubs . . . Fuck, I don't know what they are most of the time, half the time I don't even know where I am –

Teresa I do not send you –

Frank Well, you bloody go. You spend a week living on goose fat and pickled cabbage in some emerging democracy. You try persuading people who haven't seen a banana for six months that what they need is royal fucking jelly. Then try it for six months of every year and see how you feel. You wouldn't even make it as far as the supermarket to fall asleep. You'd probably be dead.

Teresa It's not my fault if Albanians haven't got bananas, it's not my fault –

Frank I never said that –

Teresa *is very, very drunk.*

Teresa Why is it all my fault?

Frank Teresa, what is it that you want from me? I can't do a thing right. What is it that I'm doing wrong?

Silence.

Teresa Why d'you do this to me?

Frank Why do I do what?

Teresa Oh he's so nice, Frank, isn't he, he's so good-natured. Well actually, I want to say, the minute he walks through his own front door, he's not nice, not remotely, he stops speaking in sentences, he just grunts, he's not the charming Frank you all think he is, he might as well be a hologram, it's a bloody nightmare, Frank, you're just like –

She stops. Pause.

Frank Just like who?

Teresa No one. Nothing.

She looks at him.

You said you were witty and entertaining. That's what you said.

Frank Oh, don't start all this again –

Teresa Witty and entertaining and five foot eleven. Hah!

Frank You said you were twenty-nine.

Teresa I did not say I was twenty-nine –

Frank Excuse me, oh, excuse me –

He takes a piece of paper from his wallet and reads.

Thoughtful, sexy, vegetarian woman, coming up thirty –

Teresa – seeks witty, entertaining man thirty to forty-five –

Frank You weren't coming up thirty –

Teresa And you weren't witty and entertaining.

Frank You didn't argue at the time.

Teresa Say something entertaining, then. Go on.

Frank Oh, for fuck's sake –

Teresa Well, say something interesting, then. Tell me something new.

Pause.

Frank I hated *Hannah and Her Sisters*.

Teresa What?

Frank I hated it. I hate Woody Allen.

Teresa *Hannah and Her Sisters* was our first date.

Frank I know.

Teresa You said you loved it.

Frank I was lying. I didn't get it. It wasn't funny.

Teresa There's that bit where the man won't buy the paintings because they don't match his sofa. That's funny.

Frank It's not. It's perfectly reasonable. You wouldn't buy, say, a big green and purple painting if you had a red sofa, would you? You'd scream every time you went into the living-room. You'd get migraine.

Teresa That's not the point of the joke.

Frank So what is the point, then?

Teresa You've been pretending to like Woody Allen all these years. You've been lying. I've been married to a stranger –

Pause. She looks at him unsteadily.

Frank.

Frank What?

Teresa Are you having an affair?

Frank What?

Teresa Just tell me.

Frank *is bewildered.*

Frank I'm not having an affair.

Teresa Are you sure?

Frank Oh hang on, let me rack my brains, it might have slipped my mind –

Teresa I'm serious –

Frank I'm not having an affair. I haven't got the energy –

Teresa But if you ever. I mean. If you ever did have an affair you'd tell me, wouldn't you?

Frank I thought that was the whole point of having an affair. You don't tell.

Teresa *punches him in the stomach. He gasps.*

Frank I was joking. I was joking.

Teresa You've got a horrible sense of humour.

Frank I'm sorry. Put the bottle down. Come on, you've had enough. Sit down.

She hands him the bottle, tearfully. Pause. Frank takes a deep breath.

Teresa. During the course of my spectacularly indirect journey here from Düsseldorf, in between bouts with the mime artist, I did a bit of thinking. Two and a half days at a health food convention being harassed by people who do vitamin therapy according to star signs reminded me of what deep down I've known for some time. We sell utter crap.

Teresa Frank –

Frank No, hang on, let me finish. I know you believe in it. I know you do. But just answer this. Were your parents happy running a hardware shop? Running a business together?

Teresa No, of course not.

Frank So why did you think you would be?

Teresa It's got nothing to do with my parents.

Frank *looks at her.*

Frank Maybe later, when the funeral's out of the way, we could, you know . . .

Teresa What?

Frank I don't know. Maybe you should run the business and I should go into something else.

Teresa Like what?

Frank The thing is, Teresa, I hate selling things. Or specifically, I hate selling things that people don't want and I don't believe in. I'm not cut out for it. I like a nice straightforward transaction, you know? 'Good evening, two pints of bitter, and a rum and Coke.' 'Certainly, sir, ice and lemon? That'll be five pounds fifty, thank you.' End of transaction. Not, 'Can I interest you in a double port while we're at it? No? Well, what about a set of toning tables, or cavity wall insulation?' I can't stand it, Teresa, it's driving me insane. I want to do something simple.

Teresa Such as what?

Pause.

Frank A pub. I want to run a pub.

Teresa You want to run a pub?

Frank I've seen one for sale just outside Ripon.

Teresa *staggers to her feet.*

Teresa A pub! I don't believe you –

Catherine *walks in.*

Catherine What's going on?

Frank Nothing's going on, I'm trying to have a conversation with Teresa –

Teresa I think I'm going to be sick. No, don't come near me. A pub, you must be out of your mind –

Frank Teresa –

Teresa Don't touch me. A pub, a pub for God's sake –

She goes out. Crashing noises from outside the room. Swearing. Frank lies back on the bed, exhausted.

Catherine Oh God.

She jumps on to the bed next to Frank.

I'm so depressed.

Frank Yeah, well, you know, it's a depressing business. Dying and whatnot.

Silence.

Catherine Frank?

Frank What?

Catherine Am I unattractive?

Frank I'm sorry?

Catherine D'you think I'm pretty?

Frank Of course you're pretty. Look, Catherine, I'm exhausted, I'm talked out, I'm sorry.

Pause.

Catherine I'm very pretty. I'm good fun. I'm a very special person. That's what Carmen, my therapist, said. I'm a brilliant cook. So why did he leave me?

Frank Jesus, Catherine, I don't know. People leave each other. You'll get over it. I have to go and talk to Teresa.

Catherine She's probably being sick. That's what she usually does if she drinks. What am I going to do?

Frank About what?

Catherine Xavier.

Frank Catherine, I've no advice to give you. I'm a middle-aged man with a health food business I don't believe in, and a normally teetotal wife who's taken to the bottle. I could say, have some ginseng tea, eat organic vegetables and learn to love yourself, but it's all a lot of bollocks.

Catherine I have to get back to him, I can't bear it. I have to see him. I mean, this is the real thing, I know it is, so I can't just give in, can I? . . . I can't bear it –

She puts her head in his lap. He looks at her as if she's an unexploded bomb. He tries to move away. She puts her arms round him.

Frank OK, OK, OK, that's enough, Catherine, take it easy –

Catherine I need a hug.

He pats her awkwardly.

Frank There you go.

Catherine That's not a hug.

Frank Teresa'll give you a hug.

Catherine How can she, with her head down the toilet?

She grips him tightly.

Frank Catherine, get off my leg –

Catherine It's OK, you're family –

Frank Exactly –

Catherine Hold me, Frank, I'm so bloody lonely. What am I going to do? I just need a bit of a hug, that's all –

Frank Catherine, I'm very flattered but steady on, eh, we don't want to –

She kisses him, immediately pulls away and jumps off the bed.

Catherine I wasn't trying to seduce you or anything –

Frank Catherine, you're a bit crazy at the moment, OK –

Catherine Oh, typical –

Frank No, I mean, it's understandable, look at Teresa. If I were you I'd phone this Pepe now, and tell him to eff off, just say, 'I'm sorry, Pepe, my mother's just died, I don't need this, take a hike –'

Catherine He's not called Pepe –

Frank Or whatever. Jose –

Catherine Oh, for fuck's sake, all I wanted was a bit of affection. A bit of support. That's all I was asking for. I wasn't asking you to marry me and bear my children. What is it with men? Why d'you always have to misread the signals? God, you make me sick –

Mary and Mike come in. **Mary** is carrying a tin box.

Mary I know you're drawn to this room like moths to a flame, but believe me, I've had enough of all of you. If anyone rings I'll let you know –

Catherine I was going anyway –

She goes out. Frank gets up.

Frank I'm worried about her. I'm serious – she needs six months in a secure unit, she's completely – anyway, I'd better go and sort Teresa out –

He goes. Mary sits on the bed and opens the box. She sifts through papers.

Mary I'm putting my name on a register, so that if he's looking for me, he'll find me. I don't even know what he looks like. I have to make him up. I sit on tubes looking at twenty-five-year-old boys, and I think, maybe that's him. Ever since he went I've been looking for him, but he's like ether, I can't get hold of him.

She unfolds a piece of paper.

Oh, thank God. Thank God it's still here. Here he is. Oh, look. Patrick. Patrick James. My boy. I wanted to call him Heathcliff. I was fourteen. I still thought life was a novel. (*She reads.*) 'Sex: boy. Name: Patrick James. Weight: six pounds four ounces.' This is all I've got left of him.

She looks round the room.

This will all be gone soon. All this furniture, all this stuff. The room will go probably. It'll disappear into the sea. And this is all I want to take from the house. This is the only thing I want to salvage. So I can prove he's mine.

She puts the paper in her bag. Puts her hand on her stomach, and goes to the mirror. Looks at herself sideways.

It's a strange feeling being pregnant. You wake up one morning and you feel so absolutely other.

She looks at him.

Mike Mary, I think, you know, you're jumping the gun here –

Mary I need a real child, not a ghost one. What are you going to do? Are you sticking with me or walking away?

Mike If you are pregnant, *if* you are, of course, I mean, of course I won't walk away, I just don't think it's – look, I know Charlie Morgan's in the Betty Ford clinic –

Mary You could always sue him. Everyone else is.

Mike Look. I know you want a child, I accept that. I know you're furious with me for having a vasectomy –

Mary Five years and you never mentioned it, that's what I can't –

Mike I don't want a child, Mary! I don't want a child. I can't want one just because you do. Love and paternity aren't indivisible in my mind. When I say I love you it means I like you, I want to be with you, I want to go to bed with you, it means all sorts of things but it doesn't necessarily mean three children and Sainsbury's every Saturday for the next thirty years –

Mary No, you've already got that –

Mike I can't help what happened before I met you! You might not like what I'm telling you, but I can't lie to make you feel better. I never wanted kids in the first place. They happened and now I love them but I don't want any more. It's not because I'm cold or selfish – at least no more than anyone else is – it's that I feel sucked dry by what people need from me – patients, Chrissie, the children. You're where I come to be equal, I come to you because you're not asking to be healed. Some people aren't paternal. It's not a crime. I'm one of them. If you're a woman and you take care of your own fertility, nobody argues. Well, I've taken care of mine. I didn't have a vasectomy because Chrissie's ill, I had it for me.

Silence.

But obviously, you know, if you *are* pregnant, I'll stick by you.

Mary Well, hey. That makes me feel a whole lot better.

Pause.

Jesus. Oh, Jesus, what a mess. Bring back the days when we had no choice in the matter.

Mike Well, you did have a choice. You chose me.

Mary Oh, choice shmoice. Have you seen what's on offer out there? Tiny little trainspotters in grey shoes, maniacs, alcoholics, men who wear their underpants for a week.

There's a knock at the door.

Go away.

Catherine *comes in.*

Catherine D'you know what she's gone and done?

Mary I don't know and I don't care.

Catherine I'll kill her –

Frank *comes in.*

Frank Look, I'm sorry, I know you're trying to get a bit of peace –

Mary Oh, don't mind about us, please –

Frank The thing is, Teresa's arranged for your mother to come back, that's all.

Mary Sorry, I'm obviously in the grip of an aural hallucination. Say that again.

Catherine The night before. She's coming back here. The night before the funeral. Tonight.

Mary What, in her coffin?

Catherine No she's coming on foot, what d'you think?

Mary Apart from anything else, where are we going to put her?

Frank In here, this is her room.

Mary I'm sleeping in here. I can't sleep next to my dead mother. For Christ's sake.

Mike We can go to a hotel –

Frank You can have it open or closed, it's up to you.

Catherine She's dead. I don't want to see her dead face.

Teresa *appears in the doorway, drunk and dishevelled.*

Teresa You should see her, it's important, and then you'll know she's dead –

Catherine She's been in a fridge for four days, of course she's bloody dead –

Teresa Well, I'm sorry, she's coming home, I've arranged it and that's that and it's no good saying why didn't I ask you because you weren't here to ask. She's coming home to spend her last night in her own bedroom. And that's the end of the story. The end. Full stop. *Finito. La fin.*

She sways precariously.

Frank . . .

Frank What?

Teresa I've had far too much to drink . . .

Go to black.

Scene Three

Same room, early next morning. The coffin is there on a low trestle.

Teresa is dressed for the funeral, talking on the phone. **Catherine** is sitting in her dressing gown, staring at the coffin.

Teresa So when you say 'even later', you mean what? . . . I see . . . No, of course . . . I understand . . . Could you ring as soon as – thank you . . . Bye . . .

She looks at Catherine, looks at her watch.

They must be snowed in.

Catherine Who?

Teresa The men who carry the coffin. Funeral operatives, he calls them. They still haven't shown up for work. He's trying to find some replacements. I wish I knew what he meant, I mean, we don't want amateurs doing it. It's supposed to be dignified. You can't just get anyone in.

Catherine says nothing. *She's staring at the coffin.*

Teresa Why don't you get dressed, or are you thinking of going like that?

Catherine It's tiny, isn't it?

Teresa looks.

Teresa She was only small.

Catherine Not as small as that.

Teresa She must have been. They don't fold them up.
Pause.

Catherine D'you think they make them to measure?

Teresa I suppose they must.

Catherine I suppose so. Yeah. I mean babies' coffins are tiny, aren't they? They're about this big.

Teresa They'd have to be. Otherwise they'd rattle around.

Catherine Mmmm . . . Unless you used loads of bubble wrap.

Teresa If you want to look at her, you just have to undo a little screw at the top. They gave me a wee screwdriver.

Silence.

I don't want to, do you?

Catherine Not really, no.

Pause. She turns away from the coffin.

I'm so depressed. I can't change my flight.

Teresa Forget him. He's a bastard.

Catherine How do you know?

Teresa You've never had a boyfriend who isn't. You don't go about it the right way.

Catherine There was that nice Swiss one. He was all right. Did you ever meet him? He was gorgeous, I felt just like Heidi.

Teresa I knew Frank was the right man for me straight away. Because I chose him. I got forty-seven replies. I whittled them down and chose the most compatible.

Catherine Yeah, but the thing is . . .

Teresa What?

Catherine At the end of the day you still landed up with Frank.

Teresa We're very, very happy actually. We're a perfect match. Because we went about it in the right way –

Catherine D'you know who he reminds me of?

Teresa Don't say it.

Catherine He does though, doesn't he? It must be a bit depressing. You go through all the palaver of whittling out the dross and you end up married to your dad.

Mary *comes in, dressed for the funeral. She looks white and drawn.*

Teresa Oh, there you are. You look lovely.

Pause. Mary looks at the coffin.

How was the hotel?

Mary Fine.

Teresa *watches her looking at the coffin.*

Mary Sorry. It's a bit of a shock. Brings you up a bit short, doesn't it . . . ?

Catherine Everyone's snowed in. There's no one to carry it –

Teresa That's no reason to still be in your dressing gown –

Catherine OK, OK, I'll get dressed, I'm going, don't worry.

She goes out. Mary looks round the room, obviously searching for something.

Teresa I'm sorry about yesterday.

Mary Forget it.

Teresa I shouldn't drink.

Mary No. You shouldn't.

She sits on the bed and takes the green tin from underneath. Begins to look through it. Teresa looks at her sharply.

Teresa Where did you find that?

Mary At the back of the airing cupboard. Why?

Teresa When?

Mary Yesterday. I wanted the copy of his birth certificate.

Teresa *snatches the tin from her.*

Teresa It's not in here.

Mary *is bewildered.*

Mary I know it's not. I took it out. I was just wondering if there was anything else –

Teresa Like what?

Mary I've no idea, adoption papers. For goodness' sake, what's the matter with you?

Teresa It's just old gas bills and bus tickets, you know what she was like, she could never throw anything away –

Mary I just want to see if there's anything else about Patrick –

Teresa There's not, I've looked.

Mary Teresa, this is ridiculous, I'm not in the mood, give me the tin.

Teresa *holds on to it grimly, unable to think of a response.*

Mary Please.

Teresa I'll give it to you later. After the funeral. OK?

Mary Why can't I have it now?

Teresa We'll sort it out later, OK.

Mary Sort what out? Give me the tin, for goodness' sake –
She makes a grab for it. A tussle.

Teresa I told you, I'll give it to you later –
More tussling.

Mary What is it?

Teresa Nothing!

Tussle gets more violent.

Mary Give me the bloody tin!

They fight. Teresa manages to hang on. She sits down with the tin.

Teresa, what the fuck is this about?!

Teresa Nothing. Nothing. I'll tell you later –

Mary Tell me now.

Teresa I can't.

Pause.

Mary It's about Patrick, isn't it?

Teresa *looks stricken. Pause.*

Teresa There're some cuttings in here about him.
Newspaper cuttings.

Mary You know where he is?

Pause.

Where is he?

Pause.

Teresa He's dead.

Silence.

I'm sorry. I wanted to tell you. I would have. I would have.
I'm sorry. I told Mum, but she said no, and then . . . I mean,
and then it was . . . I mean, the moment had passed –

Silence.

Mary What happened to him?

Teresa Some cliffs gave way. Just outside Whitby. Him and
another boy. Father Michael told us.

Frank (*off*) Teresa! What's happened to my trousers?

Teresa I meant to tell you, but when? When could we have
told you?

Mary When it happened. Why didn't you tell me when it happened?

Teresa (*offering her the tin, gently*) They're in an envelope marked medical cards. The cuttings.

Frank (*off*) Teresa!

Mary Go to him. Don't let him come in here.

Teresa Mary, I'm sorry –

Mary Go.

She goes. The lighting changes to the bluish-green glow. Faint sound of big band music in the distance. Vi appears in the open doorway. Her hair is now completely white. She looks at the coffin.

Vi Open the box.

She goes over to the coffin. Mary says nothing.

It's open. Look.

She lifts the top section of the lid and looks.

A bloody old woman. I don't recognise her. A bloody old woman in green eyeshadow. Green. They call this dignity, apparently. Green frosted eyeshadow.

She shuts the lid. Closes her eyes and sways gently to the music.

I just want one last dance before I go . . .

Mary *watches her for a while. Empties the stuff out of the tin. Finds the envelope, takes out cuttings, looks at them in bewilderment.*

Mary Nineteen eighty . . . Nineteen eighty . . . Why didn't you tell me?

Vi *stops dancing. Pause.*

Vi It seemed right at the time. You were doing your finals.

Silence.

Mary I've been waiting for him all these years. I've been waiting for him to turn up and claim me.

Vi Don't become one of those women who blame. Don't be a victim. It's beneath you.

Mary You made me give him away because it was embarrassing.

Vi I wanted you to do well. I didn't want you to be trapped. I did it for you.

Mary I look at this patient of mine. This twenty-year-old boy lying in a hospital bed, completely blank, no memory of anything at all, just an empty vessel. And all I see is Patrick. Full of memories that I didn't put there, that someone else filled him with. And I think, did I give him anything? Is there some part of him that's still mine? Maybe he smiles like me. Maybe he walks like me. Maybe he doesn't. You made me obsessed.

Vi I thought nothing could shake you. I was wrong.

Pause.

Mary Last night, I dreamt I was in a fishmonger's. On the slab, there was a box. It seemed to be full of chickens. Trussed. I couldn't be sure. 'Are they chickens?' I said. He pulled back the sacking and they weren't chickens but babies. Dead trussed babies, no bigger than my hand. When I woke up, blood. I'm not pregnant. I never was. Everything's dead. I can't bear it. I can't hold on to anything.

Vi Despair is the last refuge of the ego.

Pause.

I got that out of the *Reader's Digest*.

Pause.

Mary I'm in freefall. I opened a door and stepped out into thin air.

Vi I never knew how you felt. I never knew how you felt about anything. You thought your feelings were too rarefied to share with me. You cut me out. You looked straight through me. You shared nothing with me, not a joke, not a smile that

wasn't patronising, you never let me in, you never let me know you. This stony punishment all these years, wanting me to be better than I am, always your mother, always responsible, always to blame. How could I apologise, when you wouldn't give me the room?

Silence.

Mary I'm sorry.

Pause.

What was it like? The last few months?

Vi It's been a long time since you asked me a proper question. It's been a long time since you allowed me to know more than you.

Mary Tell me what it felt like.

Vi Like I had holes in my brain. Frightening. Huge rips. I'd not recognise people. You just think, where am I? What's going on? And then you don't know what you mean when you say 'I'. It doesn't seem to mean anything.

Mary You always still looked like you. Like essence of you. The way you moved your hands sometimes. Your laugh.

Vi Some things stay. Some things are in your bones. Songs. Babies. I was very keen on babies. Dogs. People's hair. Dancing. I wanted to dance. Usually in what Teresa called inappropriate places. Like the garden.

Mary But who did you feel like? Who are you if you take your memories away?

Vi I felt like I'd gone away. Like I'd broken up into islands and in between was just a terrible muddle of old songs and odd names drifting by, men I vaguely recognised. I felt like a cut-up thing. But sometimes the pieces would float to the surface, drift back together, and there I was, washed ashore from a pitch-black sea of nothing. Me. Still me. I'm still here.

Pause.

Forgiving someone's just like throwing a switch.

Mary Is it?

Vi It's just a decision. And afterwards you're free.

Pause.

I've done it.

Mary Have you?

Vi I forgave your father. And now I'll forgive you. But it's time I went.

She goes to the mirror and looks at herself.

Yes. I think it is.

Mary Mum. Don't go just yet –

***Vi** gives her one last look before she goes. **Mary** puts her head in her hands and cries. **Teresa** and **Frank** come in.*

Teresa Frank, get the Rescue Remedy.

Frank She needs a bloody drink.

Teresa *takes hold of her.*

Teresa Mary, pull yourself together, you've got a funeral to go to. Frank, she needs Rescue Remedy, now –

Frank *goes out.*

Mary I'm past rescuing –

Teresa Take some of these –

She tries to give her some tablets.

Mary What are they?

Teresa Aconite, it's just a matter of –

Mary It's not just a matter of anything, it's my life! Stop trying to make it little and solvable, stop trying to sort it out with vitamin pills!

Teresa They're not vitamin pills –

Mary There's no cure.

Frank *comes in with Mike. Mike goes to her.*

Frank Rescue Remedy. Duty-free vodka. Take your pick.

Mike Are you all right?

Mary I'm tired, I didn't sleep.

Frank I read somewhere the other day that if you eat a whole lettuce before you go to bed, it has pretty much the same effect as a Mogadon.

Mary Well, I'm torn now. I don't know whether to have a Caesar salad or cut my throat.

She takes the Rescue Remedy from Frank, and downs the lot.

Teresa No, no, you just need a few drops –

Mary There you are, I feel better already. Suddenly life makes sense, suddenly my mother's not dead, I am actually pregnant, in fact it's triplets. Suddenly there is meaning where there was none before. Suddenly I'm Princess Michael of fucking Kent.

She sits down, exhausted. Silence.

Teresa Pregnant?

Mary A fantasy.

Mike Sorry?

Mary I thought I was pregnant, but I'm not. It was a phantom. You obviously caught Charlie Morgan on a good day.

Teresa *(desperately)* Oh, why don't you two have a baby? Why don't you? Leave your wife and have a baby with Mary –

The door opens and Catherine appears, in a very short skirt.

Catherine Hi. What d'you think?

They look at her in confusion.

Teresa What?

Catherine The outfit. What d'you think?

Frank Sorry?

Catherine Do I look all right?

Silence.

Frank Very nice.

Teresa It's halfway up your bottom.

Catherine It's the only one I've got. Mary, d'you like it?

Mary Apart from the fact you can see your ovaries, it's fine –

The phone rings and Frank picks it up.

Frank Hello? . . . Oh, Jesus wept . . . And what? You've got what? . . . I don't believe this . . . Can we what? I beg your pardon? . . . I'm sorry? Well, I mean, I suppose if . . . Right, OK, OK, thanks, OK.

He puts the phone down.

He's on his way. He says, do we have any gentleman who can give him a hand? Taking the coffin out to the hearse.

Pause.

Mike Fine, right, OK, no problem, absolutely.

Frank I think he said it's a bit difficult for him because he's got a *plastic hand*. Is my hearing going or what?

Teresa I'm afraid not, no.

Catherine *is staring at the coffin.*

Catherine Did you open the lid?

Teresa No.

Catherine It's so weird.

Teresa What is?

Catherine It's weird she's in this box. I mean, I can't imagine it.

Frank I don't think you're supposed to.

Teresa You can't help it though, can you? Actually, if you think about it, it could be anyone in here. We'd never know the difference.

Catherine We'll never see her again. And she's so close. She had such a nice face.

Pause.

I wish she wasn't dead.

Mike Maybe we could all do with a drink.

He begins to pour whisky for everyone. Teresa puts her arm round Catherine.

Catherine I'm all right. I'll be OK. I'll be OK. I will.

Mike *hands out drinks. Awkward silence.*

Frank Whoops. Nearly said cheers.

Silence.

So. Here we are then.

He looks at his watch. Then at the coffin.

I presume it's a veneer, is it?

Teresa What?

Frank The coffin. Chipboard and veneer.

They all look at the coffin.

Mary Well, you know, we were going for the jewel-encrusted mother-of-pearl but we thought this would burn better.

Silence.

Sorry.

Frank You can get do-it-yourself coffins now, apparently.
Made of cardboard.

Mary Oh, good.

Mike Something to do in the long winter evenings. Build
your own coffin.

Sound of a car horn from outside. Mary goes to the window.

Mary That'll be him.

Mike Right. OK. Shall we, er . . . Frank?

Frank God. Right. I'll take this end, shall I?

He takes one end of the coffin.

Mike Keep your back straight –

They lift.

Frank I'll go backwards, or would you rather?

Mike No, no, I'm fine – can someone hold the door?

Teresa *does so. They manoeuvre the coffin. Catherine starts to
laugh madly.*

Catherine Poor Mum. Even her funeral's a cock-up.

Mike Pull her round to the right a bit – the right –

Frank Mind that bit of carpet – whoops, nearly . . . that's
it . . .

They go out.

(Off.) To me, to me –

The women pull on coats and gloves, etc.

Mary Just check your phone's not in your bag, will you?

Teresa I've checked.

Catherine I look ridiculous, don't I?

Mary You don't. You look fine.

Catherine I didn't hate her really.

Mary I know that. We all know that. She didn't hate you either.

Pause.

Catherine D'you remember, when Dad was out sometimes, she used to get us up in the middle of the night and give us crisps and ice-cream soda?

Mary And she'd have a Dubonnet and lemonade. God, I'd forgotten about that.

Teresa She called it a girls' night in.

Catherine We were all sleepy in our pyjamas, and she'd put on Nat King Cole.

Pause.

Mary She must have been lonely. I never thought of that.

Silence.

Catherine I put a hip flask in my bag in case we need it.

Teresa I think I'll pass on that, if you don't mind.

Mary Got tissues?

Teresa Yes.

Frank and Mike *come in.*

Frank Are we set?

Teresa I think so. Shall we go, then? Are we ready?

Mary You go on ahead. I'll be out in a minute.

Teresa Come with us, Catherine. Come on.

Frank, Teresa and Catherine *go out. Teresa with her arm around Catherine. Silence. Mary and Mike look at each other.*

Mary I think maybe that French guy was right.

Mike Sorry?

Mary The one who said water was like magnetic tape. My mother's the ghost in the machine. She goes through us like wine through water. Whether we like it or not. Nothing ends entirely.

Mike What are you going to do?

Mary Can you live a rich life without a child?

Mike You know you can.

Pause.

Mary Yes. I suppose so.

Pause.

I'm going to ask you something, Mike. I'm going to ask it once and I'll never ask it again. Leave your wife and come with me.

Pause.

Mike I think . . . I don't think we should talk about this now. Maybe we should talk about it after the funeral . . .

Mary I'm not asking you to talk about it. Take your chance, Mike.

Pause.

Mike (*almost a whisper*) Maybe afterwards we could . . .

She goes to the window. He looks at her helplessly. She looks out of the window.

Mary This snow's never going to stop. Everything frozen in its tracks. Everything cancelled.

Teresa (*off*) Mary!

Mary I've hated winter all my life. Ice on the windows, dark at three in the afternoon. Sea fret freezing the hairs in your nostrils. I've hated the stasis, the waiting for spring.

Teresa (*off*) Mary!

She turns to Mike.

Mike What are you going to do?

Mary Learn to love the cold.

They go out. As they leave, the lights dim to gold and blue. The curtains billow into the room and a flurry of snow drifts in. Nat King Cole plays faintly in the distance.

Fade down lights.

Notes

page

Act One

- 1 *taffeta*: a type of dress material made from silk or synthetic fibres.
coiffed: hair arranged and styled by a hairdresser.
clutch bag: a woman's handbag, usually quite flat, that can be 'clutched' between an arm and the body.
- 2 *Phenomenology*: a branch of science concerned with the study of phenomena, in this case the study of memory as a human phenomenon.
Georgette Heyer: a famous and prolific popular novelist (1902–74), best known for her romantic novels set in Regency England.
- 3 *iron lung*: a medical ventilator used for patients who are unable to breathe properly. It is a large cylindrical steel contraption that the individual has to lie inside.
- 4 *The High Chaparral*: a popular American television series that ran for 98 episodes between 1967 and 1971. It was set on a ranch and was a kind of cowboy soap opera about the Cannon family.
cannabis/hash cookies: a flowering plant that is used as a so-called 'recreational drug'. It is most often used like tobacco and smoked but can also be found in food. Hash cookies are made by adding cannabis to a biscuit recipe.
- 5 *Dissecting frogs*: it was common practice in biology lessons for pupils to have to cut up a dead frog in order to study different parts and functions of the body.
breast pump: a device that enables a mother who is feeding her baby on breast milk to extract milk from her breasts. The milk can then be stored in a bottle.
- 6 *Ray-bans*: the brand name of expensive sunglasses originally created by Bausch & Lomb for the United

States Air Force in 1937. Since 1999, the brand has been owned by an Italian company.

- 7 *shed cells*: cells in the body are constantly being renewed and replaced.
- 10 *Scott of the Antarctic*: Robert Falcon Scott was a famous British Antarctic explorer born in 1868. He first led an expedition to the South Pole in 1901 and came within 180 miles of it. In a second expedition he reached the South Pole in January 1912 but had been beaten to it by a Norwegian team led by Roald Amundsen. Sadly Scott and his team died on the return journey after being trapped in a blizzard.
PMT: Premenstrual Tension (or PMS – Premenstrual Syndrome), a condition experienced by a lot of women up to two weeks before their menstrual period. The symptoms vary but can include anxiety, irritability and depression or physical symptoms such as headaches and weight gain.
ovarian cyst: a sac of fluid that can form within the ovaries. In the majority of cases a cyst is not life-threatening and the condition can right itself after a few days.
- 12 *Gary Glitter*: a 1970s pop star who was part of the Glam Rock culture. He was famous for his outrageous stage costumes which were silver and glittery with high collars and for wearing high platform boots.
Asia Minor: the ancient name for an area of about 300,000 square miles which lies between the Black and Mediterranean Seas, covering most of modern-day Turkey.
vis-à-vis: in French it means ‘face-to-face’ but in this context it means ‘with relation to’.
- 14 *paracetamol*: a pain killing drug commonly available for headaches.
Barley Cup: a caffeine-free drink made from roasted barley, rye and chicory. It is used as a substitute for tea and coffee.
- 15 *Rescue Remedy*: the brand name of a restorative made from the essence of five different flowers. Dr Edward Bach created thirty-eight different flower remedies

which he claimed helped to ease different physical or mental states. Rescue Remedy is used to ease the stresses of everyday life and to restore inner calm.

beta blockers: a type of drug mainly used in the treatment of severe heart conditions and hypertension.

sauté: fried quickly with little grease.

carbonnade: a recipe using beef and onions cooked in beer.

psychosomatic: physical disorders brought on by the sufferer's mental state rather than physiological causes.

- 16 *metabolism*: this refers to all the chemical processes and changes that naturally take place in the body. For example, the way in which the body takes in food, digests it, extracts and distributes the nutrients from it and expels the waste. The rate at which this occurs (the metabolic rate) varies between individuals.

irritable bowel syndrome: a relatively common condition for which there is no definite cause, although undue stress may be a contributory factor. The symptoms are bloating or discomfort in the abdomen and constipation or diarrhoea, sometimes alternating between the two.

yogic flying: a mental state in yoga when the mind and body are so in harmony that in a cross-legged position the individual can rise into the air.

- 17 *catheter*: a small tube that is inserted into the body to introduce fluids (e.g. blood) or to extract them (e.g. urine).

- 18 *organic, no chemicals*: this is a reference to the essential difference between conventional medicine and 'alternative' medicines. Tablets prescribed by a GP are mostly chemically based and are designed to alter the body's chemistry in some way to assist the healing process. Tablets prescribed by 'alternative' therapists (e.g. a homeopath) use naturally occurring ingredients that stimulate the body's natural defences to bring about a 'cure'.

supplements: tablets that provide additional vitamins and minerals to supplement those in food. Modern food processes remove a lot of the naturally occurring vitamins and minerals and supplements are used to

- boost the required daily intake.
- 20 *Shreddies*: a brand of breakfast cereal made from woven wholegrain wheat.
- Whitby*: a small fishing port and seaside town on the north-east Yorkshire coast about fifty miles from York with a population of around 14,000. This suggests that the location of the play is along this stretch of coastline.
- colonic irrigation*: an alternative therapy also known as colonic hydrotherapy irrigation which helps to remove waste products and toxins from the human gut. A tube is inserted in the rectum and warm water is passed through the colon to encourage the bowel to empty itself.
- Alzheimer's disease*: a form of dementia named after the German neuropathologist, Alois Alzheimer who discovered it in 1906.
- sliced white bread*: white bread is considered to be inferior to wholemeal bread because much of the goodness and nutrients that naturally occur in wheat are lost in the process of making white flour.
- cavalier*: being offhand or indifferent about things.
- 21 *guilt fest*: a colloquialism which refers to bringing guilty feelings for past wrongs to the surface. Literally it means 'a festival of guilt'.
- 22 *menopause*: a point in a woman's life around the age of 45–50 when the menstrual cycle normally ceases.
- Esperanto*: invented by Dr L. L. Zamenhof in 1887, it is an artificial international language.
- combine harvester*: a large piece of farm machinery for cutting down and collecting crops such as wheat and barley.
- 23 *incontinent memory syndrome*: incontinence is a term that relates to lack of bladder or bowel control. Mary is using it here to draw a comparison with someone who has no control over their memories.
- bridge rolls*: type of small bread roll that is used for finger-buffets.
- Fuengirola*: a popular seaside town on the south coast of Spain with five miles of sandy beaches.
- 24 *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*: published in 1563, *Actes and*

Monuments of These Latter and Perillous Days, Touching Matters of the Church by John Foxe is an account of the persecution of English Protestants by Catholics.

- 25 *relief of Mafeking*: the anglicised version of Mafikeng, a town in the Northern Cape of South Africa. At the start of the Boer War in 1899, the Boers besieged the town but it was held for eight months by the British under the command of Robert Baden-Powell. The relief of Mafeking by British reinforcements came about at 4 a.m. on 17 May 1900.

St Vincent de Paul Society: a charity founded in 1833 by Catholic students in Paris. Its work is based on the teachings of the seventeenth-century priest who gave up his career in the church to serve the poor and needy.

- 26 *Woolworth's*: Woolworth's, the department store, has always been associated with selling inexpensive goods. The implication here is that their mother wore cheap perfume.

- 27 *Phul Nana*: Phūl-nānā (or Bouquet of Indian Flowers) – an English perfume produced by J. Grossmith and Sons of London around 1891. The bottle had a colourful label depicting a dancing Indian woman and a seated man in ethnic dress and was very popular during the first half of the twentieth century.

K2 in slingbacks: K2 is the second highest mountain after Everest, part of the Himalayas, and slingbacks, women's shoes with a thin strap that goes around the heel, would of course be completely inappropriate footwear.

- 28 *Wuthering Heights*: in the novel by Emily Brontë there is a famous scene when the narrator, Lockwood, hears someone tapping on the window who turns out to be a ghostly figure from the past.

Heathcliff . . . Cathy: Heathcliff and Cathy are the ill-fated lovers in *Wuthering Heights*. Mary is right in correcting Teresa because it was Cathy tapping at the window (see above).

- 29 *Robert Redford*: the Hollywood screen actor who in the late sixties/early seventies became something of a heart-throb.

- 30 *psoriasis*: a skin disease caused by new cells being produced too quickly.
- 32 *A Trophic Theory . . .*: a theory which links the development of neural connections with food and nutrition.
- 33 *post-traumatic amnesia*: memory loss after an accident.
- 34 *intravenous drip*: having a tube inserted into the vein to provide nutrients or drugs would suggest that Mike has given Mary the impression that his wife is seriously ill and confined to a hospital bed.
- 35 *hypothermia*: abnormally low body temperature caused by prolonged exposure to cold weather.
- Margaret Rutherford*: British stage and screen actress (1892–1972), well known for her portrayal of eccentric old women like Agatha Christie’s Miss Marple and Noël Coward’s Madame Arcati in *Blithe Spirit*.
- 36 *efficacy of homeopathy*: Mike is describing a test designed to see whether or not homeopathic treatment is capable of producing the intended results. Homeopathic medicine is produced by diluting a tiny amount of drug (the curative element) many times over in a water solution.
- 39 *vasectomy*: a method of male conception where the duct in the male testicles that carries sperm to the point of ejaculation has been removed.
- 40 *Zimbabwe*: a country in southern Africa (formerly part of the British colony of Rhodesia) which was formed in 1980 after a civil war led by Robert Mugabe. There is a high level of poverty and problems caused by the HIV/Aids epidemic, hence the truck-load of donations.
- 41 *St Teresa of Avila*: Catherine is sarcastically comparing Teresa to the Spanish saint (1515–82).
- 42 *a wardrobe full of tat and three pelican children*: Mary is indicating that all her mother has got to show for her life is a wardrobe full of worthless clothes and three greedy, parasitic daughters. See Shakespeare’s *King Lear* III.iv where Lear refers to his ‘pelican daughters’. Young pelicans were thought to feed on their mother’s blood.
- 43 *Alma Cogan*: highly popular female singer in the 1950s/60s, known for her flamboyant dress sense. She

was only thirty-four when she died of stomach cancer in 1966.

crimplene: a synthetic crease-resistant fibre made from petro-chemicals. Unfortunately it has a tendency to catch easily and create static electricity.

Formica: a well-known laminate used for table tops and kitchen surfaces.

- 44 *the Boer War*: the war fought between the British and the Boers from 1899 to 1902 in South Africa.

- 46 *carcinogens*: substances that cause cancer.

Düsseldorf: an important German city on the river Rhine with a population of around half a million people.

Carlisle: a town in north-west England.

candlewick: a tufted cotton material.

Cologne: Germany's fourth largest city on the Rhine with a population of nearly one million.

Pan's bloody People: an all-female dance group best known for their regular appearance on BBC's *Top of the Pops* show during the 1970s.

East Midlands: an airport just south of Nottingham off the M1 motorway.

- 47 *leaves on the line/wrong sort of snow*: at times of severe delays on the railways, British Rail often gave these as reasons.

Act Two

- 49 *Torquay*: a seaside town on a part of the south coast of Devon known as the English Riviera owing to the relatively mild climate.

- 53 *Rotary Club*: an international organisation with groups at a local level. Members are usually business men devoted to providing support and good works in the local community.

- 54 *Hola? Xavier, por favor*: Spanish for 'Hello? Xavier, please.'

- 56 *impetigo*: a contagious skin disease.

hives: the common name for *urticaria*, an allergic skin condition when itchy red and white raised patches occur.

- 61 *ME*: Myalgic Encephalopathy or Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. Until 2002, the medical profession was sceptical about the validity of ME as a condition. The symptoms are severe tiredness, poor concentration, muscle pain and problems with memory. It usually occurs in people between the ages of twenty-five and forty-five.
- 62 *George the Fifth*: king of England, born in 1865, ruling from 1910 to 1936. In later life he spent much time in Bognor Regis on the Sussex coast recovering from ill health and a myth grew up that his dying words were ‘Bugger Bognor’.
- 64 *solipsistic bollocks*: solipsism is a philosophical view that argues that the only certain knowledge an individual has is that they exist.
- 65 *crappy Dylan Thomas poem*: Welsh poet (1914–53). Frank is possibly referring to Thomas’s poem, ‘And Death Shall Have No Dominion’.
- Goody Two Shoes*: the nickname for Margery Meanwell, the character in an anonymous children’s story published in 1765. Margery is an orphan girl who only has one shoe and is given a complete pair by a rich gentleman, which makes her happy. She becomes a teacher and marries a wealthy widower. A ‘Goody Two Shoes’ has become someone who is virtuous.
- Our Lady of Lourdes*: in 1858 a fourteen-year-old peasant girl, Bernadette Soubirous, reported seeing visions of a lady in white. Catholics believe that the visions were of the Virgin Mary. Bernadette became a saint. The small town of Lourdes in the French Pyrenees has since become a major place of pilgrimage.
- peritonitis*: a serious infection or inflammation of the peritoneum, a thin membrane that covers the intestinal tract and lines the abdomen.
- 66 *the Borgias*: a notorious and powerful Spanish family of the Renaissance period, associated with corruption, adultery, incest and murder. Rodrigo Borgia became Pope (Alexander VI, 1492–1503).
- 67 *Eskimos . . . snow . . . Inuit*: the Eskimo people inhabit

Siberia, Alaska, Canada, and Greenland. In the latter two countries the term 'Eskimo' has fallen out of use to be replaced by 'Inuit' which is also the language spoken in these regions. There is a myth that because Inuits live in an environment covered by snow they have innumerable words for it.

68 *hologram*: a three-dimensional projection.

69 *Hannah and Her Sisters*: an Academy Award-winning film, written, directed and starring Woody Allen, released in 1986. It is about the inter-relationship of three sisters played by Mia Farrow (Hannah), Barbara Hershey (Lee) and Dianne Wiest (Holly). One thread of the story concerns Hannah's husband's adulterous affair (played by Michael Caine) with her sister Lee.

Woody Allen: American comedian, writer, actor, playwright, jazz musician and film director, born in 1935 in New York, where most of his work is set.

71 *toning tables*: a type of mechanical couch providing passive exercise to improve muscle tone, posture and circulation.

cavity wall insulation: a process of injecting insulating foam into the cavities of outside walls to prevent heat loss.

Ripon: an ancient cathedral city in the dales of North Yorkshire with a population of around 16,000.

73 *ginseng tea*: tea made from the root of the ginseng plant. It is used as a stimulant and a number of health claims are made for it.

74 *ether*: a colourless liquid which is relatively unstable and can turn to vapour very quickly.

75 *Betty Ford clinic*: a clinic for the treatment of alcohol and drug addiction set up by the wife of a former American President in 1982.

76 *choice shmoice*: a kind of Yiddish or Jewish rhyming slang meaning choice/no choice or choice, call this a choice?

77 *finito. La fin*: the Italian, followed by the French word for 'finished' or 'the end'.

79 *Heidi*: the leading and title character in a children's book about an orphan girl, set in the Swiss Alps, written in 1880 by the Swiss author Johanna Spyri.

- 84 *Reader's Digest*: a best-selling pocket-sized magazine that originated in the USA in 1922. It is aimed at a family audience and contains articles of the type where Vi would have read the kind of homespun psychology she is quoting.
- 86 *aconite*: also known as wolfsbane or monkshood, the root of the plant contains a deadly poison. It is used in minute quantities as a homeopathic remedy for the treatment of shock, anxiety and grief.
- 87 *Mogadon*: one of the trade names used for Nitrazepam, a drug used for the treatment of insomnia.
- Caesar salad*: a type of salad eaten as a starter or main course. It is usually made from cos or romaine lettuce to which are added croutons, shavings of parmesan cheese and anchovies. This is covered in a dressing made from Worcestershire sauce, mustard, egg, garlic, lime juice and virgin olive oil.
- Princess Michael of Kent*: the German-born wife of Prince Michael of Kent, first cousin of Queen Elizabeth II.
- 91 *Dubonnet*: the brand name of a popular French aperitif made from wine, herbs and spices, created by Joseph Dubonnet in 1846.
- Nat King Cole*: black American singer/songwriter born in Alabama in 1919. He was popular throughout the 1950s and early 1960s with hits such as 'Mona Lisa', 'Unforgettable' and 'Ramblin' Rose'. He died of lung cancer in 1965.
- 92 *sea fret*: a kind of mist or fog that drifts off the surface of the sea.
- 92 *stasis*: a word that has medical connections to describe a condition where there is no movement of bodily fluids such as urine or blood. In a general sense it refers to a period when nothing seems to happen or change which here reflects the state of Mary's relationship with Mike.

Questions for Further Study

1. 'A tragicomic tour de force about women on the verge of who knows what' (*Evening Standard*, 3 May 2000). To what extent is *The Memory of Water* both comic and tragic?
2. 'Isn't there something troubling about a play which treats family politics with great intelligence, yet takes one of its victims more seriously than the others?' (*The Times*, 13 January 1999). How far do you agree with this view?
3. Consider ways in which the set and lighting design can create the effect of winter. How important is the snowbound, December setting to the atmosphere of the play?
4. Catherine has been described as 'druggy, promiscuous and manipulatively hypochondriacal'. How far would you agree with this interpretation and how would you portray her character in performance?
5. The play requires a number of detailed and period properties. Make a list of the play's requirements in this respect and carry out the necessary research to identify exactly what they should be.
6. *The Memory of Water* is a play by a woman and about women but at the same time it has offended radical feminists. Where do you think the play stands in relation to female politics?
7. The play would be just as effective without Frank and Mike and the presence of Vi's ghost. How important are these characters to the structure of the play and the storytelling?
8. Teresa is completely self-obsessed and self-pitying. How much sympathy do you have for her as a character?
9. One of the major themes of the play is the effect of memory. How does Shelagh Stephenson treat this idea and what impression is it meant to leave on an audience?

10. There are too many funny lines just for the sake of it to the detriment of the serious themes in the play. Identify examples where this may or may not be the case and provide your own critique on this issue.
11. How do you account for the popularity of *The Memory of Water*? What is your own view of the play?
12. 'Whatever I thought I was writing about at the time, they [the plays] are in fact about death, dying, being dead, being afraid of death, being obsessed with it.' How does Shelagh Stephenson work out this preoccupation with death in *The Memory of Water*?
13. What do you understand by the term 'black comedy'? To what extent do you think *The Memory of Water* fits this description?
14. What does the play have to say about family relationships?
15. None of the characters in the play comes over as being likeable or sympathetic. Do you agree or disagree with this statement?
16. How would you go about representing the ghost of Vi? Discuss the importance of these scenes and how you would work on them as a director or as an actor.
17. 'The production can't disguise the fact that the dramatic current flows with a fluctuating strength.' What do you consider to be the strengths and weaknesses of the play?
18. *The Memory of Water* has been described as a 'populist' drama. How would you account for the play's popularity?
19. How important is the original period of the play? What would be the effect of relocating its time and place?
20. While the idea for the play might have arisen from the death of the author's own mother, Shelagh Stephenson has made it clear that the play is not autobiographical and is a product of her imagination. To what extent is the play believable or has the writer let her imagination run away with her?

Steve Lewis was born in Andover, Hampshire, and studied at Middlesex, Exeter and Sussex Universities. He began his career as a Youth Theatre Director at the Everyman Theatre, Liverpool, followed by many years as a teacher in further education and director of over a hundred student and community productions. He has held the positions of Qualifications Leader for Performing Arts with Edexcel and Senior Lecturer in Drama Education at the University of Central England. He is an Associate for Drama with the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and was Director of Visual and Performing Arts at City College, Brighton and Hove, where he is now Head of Higher Education and Adult Learning. Steve has published three volumes of play collections in the Collins Short Plays Plus series, adapted Euripides' *The Trojan Women*, which has been widely used as an A level set text, is co-author of the Edexcel AS Drama and Theatre Studies Student Book (2008) and has written the commentary and notes for the Methuen Drama Student Editions of Theatre Workshop and Joan Littlewood's *Oh What A Lovely War* and Willy Russell's *Educating Rita*.